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**The Therapeutic Landscape of a Marian Apparition Site in Conyers, Georgia**

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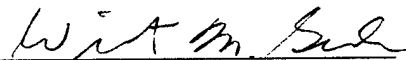
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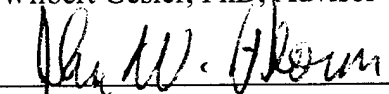
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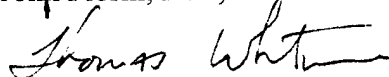
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## ABSTRACT

**TARA LYNN SWEENEY. The Therapeutic Landscape of a Marian Apparition Site in Conyers, Georgia (Under the direction of Wilbert M. Gesler)**

Since October 13, 1990, the Virgin Mary and Her son, Jesus Christ, have been appearing to a local woman in Conyers, Georgia. This research effort in no way attempts to validate the appearances of these holy persons. Instead, this study focuses on the impact such heavenly apparitions are having on the landscape of and the people visiting the apparition site known as *The Farm*.

This thesis utilizes a cultural geographic analysis of the events occurring in Conyers, Georgia, and addresses concepts such as *therapeutic landscape*, *symbolic landscape*, and *sense of place*. The main focus of the thesis is to elucidate whether this apparition site can be considered a therapeutic landscape. To determine the therapeutic value of the Conyers' landscape it was necessary to first determine why the pilgrims visiting the apparition site attach significance and meaning to that place and what factors seem to contribute to the therapeutic value of that landscape.

Through *participant observation* and interviewing pilgrims, it was determined that the following factors create Conyers' therapeutic landscape: location, setting, and natural beauty of the apparition site; the religious diversity in the area of the apparition site; the lack of commercialism around the apparition site; the apparition room where Jesus and Mary appear; and the presence of ritual, *communitas*, and flow. Overall, this research fits into and contributes to the new humanistic cultural geography.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This thesis completes what has truly been an awesome experience here at the University of North Carolina. Accomplishing the Geography Department's Masters requirements in just one year was not an easy task and I am forever indebted to those who offered me their support, guidance, and love. It was only through the help of God, family, friends, and colleagues that I was able to continually push myself, complete the program, and still be smiling today.

I would first like to thank my committee. Dr. Gesler's research and interest in therapeutic landscapes brought me to this thesis topic. I thank him for being an incredible advisor and mentor. He was always available to discuss my research, was willing to send drafts of this thesis back and forth across the Atlantic Ocean, and he genuinely issued his encouragement and support at just the right times.

Dr. Whitmore played an instrumental role in the development of this thesis from the early days of Geography 202. The time he dedicated to me in that course, the challenges he always presented, and his approachability made him a clear choice for my committee. I thank Dr. Tom for taking an interest in me, for challenging me and my thoughts, and for always offering his insight, guidance, and support.

Approximately one year ago, I sat with Dr. Florin in his office and discussed the rigorous program I would be undertaking during my only year at Carolina. I must admit that finding out the tasks ahead of me was rather unsettling at the time but with his encouragement and support I knew that it could be and would be done. I thank him for taking a chance on a LT and providing me with a terrific taste of the civilian world! In

terms of this thesis I would like to sincerely thank Dr. Florin for his time, interest, and support as one of my readers.

Thanks certainly go out to my fellow graduate students and “pit” dwellers! Each added to my life and time here at UNC in different ways and I will be forever grateful.

To my family and Julie who dealt with the ups and downs of yet another incredible year. I would very much like to thank them for their love, support, and friendship. All I can say is that WE made it!

I would be remiss if I did not extend my final thanks to my grandfather. He was truly the inspiration behind these words and provided me with the energy and desire to keep going. In his special way he continually offered his prayers, love, and support for me and my research.

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## **CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION**

Since October of 1990, a half million people have traveled to the town of Conyers, Georgia, located twenty miles outside of Atlanta. The majority of these people travel to the area because supernatural phenomena are believed to occur on a small farm in the town. It is on this farm that Jesus Christ and the Blessed Virgin Mary are reported to appear to a housewife and give her messages that she is to express to the United States.

This research will not attempt to verify the authenticity of such apparitions. Instead, the focus is on the meaning of Conyers as a therapeutic landscape for those who visit the apparition site. The goals of this study are to determine what factors contribute to the therapeutic value of Conyers' landscape and why pilgrims attach significance and meaning to this place.

Besides providing a very brief overview of the events occurring in Conyers, Georgia, and stating the overall research goal, this introductory chapter will also discuss why I became interested in a study on therapeutic landscapes, address the impact and importance of such a study on geography and the medical world, and outline the remaining chapters in this thesis.

### **1.1 Interest in Therapeutic Landscapes**

Ever since I was a child, the Virgin Mary has always been a part of my life. Having been raised a devout Roman Catholic, I grew to accept and understand the

Church's teaching on the important role of Mary as the Virgin Mother of Jesus and as an intercessor for us here on earth to Her son in heaven. Although keeping these thoughts in mind, it wasn't until my late teenage years that Mary played a significant role in my life. It was at this time that my grandfather and I began sharing the love of Mary and discussing the important role that She plays in our personal lives of faith. We spoke frequently of the apparition events and healings occurring in Lourdes, France, and Medjugore, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and dreamed of a time when we might be able to go ourselves. You see, my grandfather was a man of tremendous faith but, among other things, he suffered from multiple sclerosis and cancer during his lifetime. I always believed he was ripe for a miracle healing, but realizing that time, money, and good health were necessary for such a long pilgrimage, a journey to Europe was going to stay a dream.

When I arrived at the University of North Carolina, I quickly learned that there was an area of cultural geography that studied therapeutic pilgrimage sites and that a professor in the geography department was a leader in this research. I was thoroughly interested and through early research, I learned that a small body of people had looked at Marian pilgrimage sites as therapeutic landscapes, or very simply, places where people go to make themselves feel better. Because of my belief in Marian apparitions and faith in general, I knew that pilgrimage sites were indeed places where people have gone for and received a spiritual renewal or physical healing. I, therefore, believe therapeutic landscapes exist in Marian pilgrimage sites and these sites provide emotional, spiritual, and physical healing for many of those who travel to them.

## **1.2 Importance to Geography**

The Virgin Mary has been sighted throughout the world. In fact, it is estimated that over the last two thousand years, Mary has been sighted approximately twenty thousand times (Woodward, 1991). The most documented of these sightings are Lourdes, France; Medjugorje, Bosnia-Herzegovina; Fatima, Portugal; and Guadalupe, Mexico. In comparison to these Marian sites, the experiences at Conyers are not as widely known. Therefore, there is much to study at this particular location and any research on Conyers will contribute to the small body of knowledge already existing on Marian sightings. Within this framework of Marian sightings, very few geographic researchers have attempted to analyze the special meaning and healing qualities of these Marian places to those who visit them. I think a study of an American apparition site in Conyers, Georgia, might help cultural and medical geographers understand how an ordinary landscape can be perceived by visitors as sacred and subsequently contain a healing or therapeutic value for them. In addition, I believe an understanding of therapeutic landscapes and the pilgrims who travel there can also hold significance for the medical world. With a more complete understanding of therapeutic landscapes and the various effects such places have on transforming people's thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and ways of life, medical doctors and others may be able to better utilize such places as real and tangible avenues of therapy for patients. Pilgrimage sites in general, and Marian apparition sites in particular, are examples of such therapeutic landscapes that may serve as an alternate therapy for medical patients. This study, therefore, will provide empirical evidence supporting the ideas of therapeutic landscapes, contribute to cultural and medical



geography's overall understanding of healing places and therapeutic landscapes, and address the possible impact therapeutic landscapes may have on the medical world.

### **1.3 Research Outline**

In order to understand the therapeutic value of Conyers, Georgia, a number of tasks had to be accomplished. This thesis is therefore structured as follows. First, it was necessary to understand where such a study would fit in the world of geography, specifically cultural geography. As a result, Chapter 2 addresses the role and importance of cultural geography to this study. It looks at two major forces within the subdiscipline, what types of research are currently being accomplished in the subdiscipline, and where this study fits into the new humanist cultural geography. In addition, essential concepts to this study such as *symbolic landscape*, *sense of place*, and *therapeutic landscapes* are introduced and discussed. Chapter 3 reviews the methodology and data sources used to research this thesis. Here relevant concepts of *qualitative research* and *participant observation* are presented, discussed, and justified. In addition, field trips to Conyers and the actual interaction with the pilgrims are addressed. Chapter 4 places the apparition events occurring in Conyers within the broader context of Marian pilgrimage. Within this chapter, the significance of the Virgin Mary to pilgrims, the evolution of Marian pilgrimage worldwide, and the Roman Catholic Church's perception of the cult of Mary is discussed. Chapter 5 addresses the pilgrimage site and the events that specifically occur there. Within this framework, the study area, the apparitions, rituals, miracles, and most importantly, the pilgrims are introduced. Chapter 6 gives my perspective as a participant observer at the apparition site and is then followed by Chapter 7 which

presents and interprets the questions and responses the pilgrims gave while being interviewed for this study. Chapter 8 utilizes the responses and experiences gained in Chapter 7 to more fully elucidate and determine what factors of Conyers' landscape contribute to it being considered a therapeutic landscape. The final chapter, chapter 9, summarizes the research effort and suggests avenues for future research in this field.

## **CHAPTER II: CULTURAL GEOGRAPHY IN AMERICA**

To determine what factors contribute to the therapeutic value of Conyers' landscape and why pilgrims attach meaning to *The Farm* (the official name of the Conyers apparition site) a cultural geographic perspective is appropriate and necessary. This study recognizes that presently within cultural geography somewhat of a dualism exists between what are known as "traditional" and "new" cultural geographies. "Traditional" cultural geography simply refers to the subdiscipline as it first appeared in American universities in the early decades of the twentieth century to the late 1950s and early 1960s. "New" cultural geography encompasses the subdiscipline that emerged and expanded after the quantitative revolution in the 1950s and 1960s. The following chapter presents these two major forces in cultural geography, discusses the major players and terms associated with each, and relates the importance of each to this study.

### **2.1 "Traditional" Cultural Geography**

Cultural geography appeared in American universities in the 1920s and 1930s as a subdiscipline of human geography and it developed primarily in response to the prevalence of environmental determinism within geographic thought. With its main focus on the morphology of landscape, the interdependence of humans and the natural landscape, and the role of human intervention upon that landscape, the subdiscipline found its guidance primarily from Carl Sauer at the University of California at Berkeley.

Sauer's philosophy can be characterized by the following geographic traits:

an historical orientation, an emphasis on man's agency on the physical environment, a preoccupation with material artefacts, a rural and preindustrial bias, a heavily empirical field tradition, and a tendency to non-cumulative unique studies (Ley 1981, p. 250).

In his research, Sauer introduced the concepts of the morphology of the material landscape and the role of human activities upon that landscape. He viewed this material landscape or cultural landscape in terms of three elements: "the physical landscape, the characteristics of a group of people, and time" (Gesler and Florin, unpublished manuscript, p. 10). Sauer's focus on the material landscape and the role of humans modifying that landscape gradually gained support in the geographic community. As a result, cultural geographers in subsequent decades focused on the cultural landscape and engaged in "descriptive fieldwork" and "observation" as the means to research, describe, and teach the evolution of the material landscape (Duncan and Ley 1993).

Sauer was not, however, the only prominent figure of this time. For example, in the early 1920s, Robert Park and other members of the Chicago School began studying human ecology which applies ecological concepts to the study of human relations with their physical as well as social environments. That is, humans are seen as a dominant species within ecosystems" (Gesler and Florin, unpublished manuscript, p. 10). This theory was quickly introduced to geography by Harlan Barrows who wanted to "define geography as human ecology. . . and wanted geography to be unified around the idea of human adjustment to physical environments" (Gesler and Florin, unpublished manuscript, p. 11). In addition, two other geographers, Philip Wagner and Marvin Mikesell published a landmark statement in 1962 that outlined cultural geographic thought up until their

publication and discussed the major themes in the subdiscipline. These themes were culture, culture areas, cultural landscapes, culture history, and cultural ecology. These “traditional” perspectives of cultural geography remained uncontested until the 1950s.

## **2.2 The Quantitative Revolution**

During the first few decades of cultural geography’s existence, dissatisfaction grew among those geographers who questioned the scientific validity of cultural geography. In the middle of the twentieth century, geographers debated the science of geography with great enthusiasm. Those geographers not aligned with traditional cultural geography criticized the emphasis on subjectivity and meaning of this subdiscipline because it was “considered . . . to be inferior to the objectivity and quantification of ‘scientific’ inquiry” (Gesler and Florin, unpublished manuscript, p. 22). Some of these geographers even suggested that human and cultural geography were not sciences at all.

Around the same time that this period of intellectual disturbance occurred within geography, the quantitative revolution emerged throughout the social sciences. The quantitative revolution basically set out to make the social sciences more scientific. This movement found its roots in positivism and this paradigm became the major threat to cultural geography’s continued existence in the field of geography. But as strong as this positivist movement was, it did not go unchallenged. Towards the end of the 1970s, the philosophy of humanism reemerged in opposition to positivism. Contrary to positivism, humanists seek to obtain knowledge subjectively. The focus of this philosophical perspective is twofold: first it attempts to *explain* how individuals react to their environment in terms of their emotions or values; second, humanists attempt to

*understand* how landscapes are interpreted symbolically by humans. Humanism studies the “what is where” and “why is it there” questions in terms of human experience, beliefs, values, and perceptions. Humanist endeavors seek to increase awareness and appreciation of particular cultural events and actors in our world, not to develop concepts that can be applied uniformly over space and time. A humanist geographer is expected to be an “insider . . . seeking to understand how events have occurred not as exemplars of general laws but as the outcomes of individual decisions” (Eyles 1988, p. 190).

### 2.3 “New” Cultural Geography

Emerging from the quantitative revolution with a strong emphasis on humanism, a new cultural geography developed in the late 1970s. When it appeared in the discipline, the “new” cultural geography was “a melange of epistemological positions and thematic interests” (Entrikin 1991, p. 18). In his first article in a three part series for the journal, *Progress in Human Geography*, Ley echoed this disunity within cultural humanistic geography: “during the 1970s, the humanistic movement added a disparate and lively contribution which has included both endorsement and challenge to conventional work in cultural geography” (Ley 1981, p. 249). The splintered subdiscipline led to the adoption of many different humanistic perspectives (i.e., existentialism, phenomenology, idealism, etc.) and methodologies by cultural geographers. The authors of the recently published *Re-Reading Cultural Geography*, suggest that with the fragmentation,

some themes, such as cultural ecology, sustained large and productive constituencies throughout the period. Other themes gradually lost adherents. At the same time other humanistic concepts were discovered, rediscovered, and developed within the contexts of both Berkeley school cultural geography and the discipline at large (Foote, et al 1994, p. 12).

The early 1980s became a period when the fragments and splinters of the “new” cultural geography finally reunited. The transition from the 1970s to the 1980s was described in Ley’s second article in his *Progress in Human Geography* series. Ley examines

certain emerging aspects of theory and methodology, as well as a particular stream of empirical work which, while heavily landscape oriented, is more ambitious in its interrogation of the cultural landscape than the precedent of the Sauerian tradition (Ley 1983, p. 267).

With this in mind, geographers such as Brookfield (1964) and Wagner (1975) began advocating a subdiscipline that was more dynamic than traditional cultural geography emphasizing “the symbolic aspects of landscape formation and the importance of studying people as members of groups and as belonging to institutions” (Gesler and Florin, unpublished manuscript, p. 13). The emerging subdiscipline challenged the way traditional cultural geography operated and suggested that there is more to culture than just its material landscape, most notably, the symbolic landscape. The new cultural geography does not, however, ignore the work of the traditionalists. Lester Rowntree states that it would be counterproductive to sever traditional ties with cultural geography. He thinks cultural geography can be enriched by the combination of both old and new ideas (Rowntree 1988). While the new cultural geography does not completely separate itself from traditional cultural geography, it does advocate that it is the symbolic landscape that should be studied by cultural geographers. As a result, the new subdiscipline is devoted to the individuality of culture, people’s sense of place, and people’s perspectives on why landscapes have meaning to them. This study addresses

such perspectives and will contribute to this “new” cultural geography by focusing on three primary concepts: *symbolic landscapes*, *sense of place*, and *therapeutic landscapes*.

### 2.3.1 Symbolic Landscapes and Sense of Place

Vital to the discussion of a new cultural geography is understanding the meaning of the *symbolic landscape* and people’s *sense of place*. The *symbolic landscape* is an expression of “cultural values, social behavior, and individual actions worked upon particular localities over a span of time” (Meinig 1979, p. 6). Symbolic landscapes represent the people, culture, and society inhabiting that landscape and reflect their desires to create some particular image of life (Meinig 1979). *Sense of place* arises as the symbolic landscape is experienced. It deals with how people view the landscape and what emotions and feelings they attach to that environment. Sense of place describes how people “make sense of the world, attach value to the environment, and invest the material world with symbolic significance” (Jurkovich 1994, p.12). Nicholas Entrikin explains,

The specificity of place has been associated with the unique experiences of place and the meanings that we associate with these experiences . . . Uniqueness thus becomes a function of the quality of experience rather than a description of a world that is completely external to the knowing subject (Entrikin 1991, p. 18).

To Yi-Fu Tuan, “geography is a mirror, revealing the essence of human existence and human striving: to know the world is to know oneself . . . thus the study of landscapes is the study of the essences in the societies which mould them” (Johnston 1991, p. 174). Therefore, Tuan advocates that cultural landscapes, characteristic of the traditional geography, play an important role at this time in the new cultural geography



because they reflect the importance of human essence and people's perception of the environment in which they live.

### **2.3.2 Therapeutic Landscapes**

The term *landscape* is a very elusive concept that has been described in various ways. But for the purposes of this research it is important to understand what a *therapeutic landscape* is. "A therapeutic landscape arises when the physical and built environments, social conditions, and human perceptions combine to produce an atmosphere which is conducive to healing" (Gesler 1995, p. 3). In short, a therapeutic landscape is simply a place that is "associated with treatment or healing" (Gesler 1992, p. 735). This sense of healing can be emotional, spiritual, and/or physical. The concept of a therapeutic landscape is fairly new in new cultural geography. Since this concept is the basis for my study, a presentation of the research conducted in this field is necessary.

Basically, research addressing such a view of landscapes attempts to determine why certain places or situations are perceived to be therapeutic. Only a very small number of geographers have attempted to address the idea of a therapeutic landscape. The forerunners of this field are Smith (1976), Philo (1987), Kearns (1991, 1993) and Gesler (1992, 1993, 1996). A small amount of geographic literature does exist specifically on therapeutic landscapes or healing places similar to Conyers, Georgia. For example, Wilbert Gesler analyzed the Lourdes, France, pilgrimage site as a place of spiritual, mental, and physical healing (Gesler 1996). In addition, Gesler examined the therapeutic landscape of Epidauros, Greece (1993) and Jamie Jurkovich examined Medjugorje's landscape as a place of meaning to its visitors (1994). Two other research

efforts also contribute significant understanding of people's sense of place and therapeutic landscapes (Swofford 1994; Palka 1995). Swofford conducted a case study on the Appalachian Trail addressing the perceptions of wilderness recreation landscapes; Palka examined the reciprocal relationship between visitors and Denali National Park and addressed how people developed a 'sense of place' in that national park.

## **2.4 Conclusions**

Until the next transformation occurs, the traditional and the new cultural geographies will continue to be prevalent throughout the subdiscipline. More than likely, the symbolic landscape theme will also dominate humanist cultural geography as the means to understand the beliefs, values, and perceptions that inspire individuals to shape the environment in which they live. But this methodology and philosophy will not last forever. For many years, traditional cultural geography went unchallenged in its thought, theory, and research methods. When the quantitative revolution challenged the existing philosophy, cultural geography was forced to redefine and strengthen its methodological foundation. In doing so, not only did humanism reemerge in opposition to the positivistic movement, but it also inspired a "new" alternative cultural geography to develop within the subdiscipline.

## **CHAPTER III: RESEARCH APPROACH, DATA SOURCES, AND METHODOLOGY**

The objective of this chapter is to provide an understanding of how the research for this study was conducted and how conclusions were subsequently drawn. To accomplish this goal this chapter will address the following: first, research methods, participant observation, and data collection for qualitative studies will be addressed to provide the foundation for the research effort; second, background information concerning field trips to the study site will be described, sampling biases will be discussed, and the interviewing process will be reviewed so the reader will have a greater understanding of the entire research effort; and finally, methodology and analysis will explain how I drew conclusions from the data gained during the research effort.

### **3.1 Qualitative Research Methods and Data Sources**

Humanistic studies lend themselves to qualitative evaluation and research methods. Qualitative research methods consist of three kinds of data collection: (1) in-depth, open-ended interviews; (2) direct observation; and (3) written documents (Patton 1990). For this study, I utilized all three types of data collection. The first type, interviews, provided direct quotations from the respondents to gain insight into their experiences, opinions, and feelings. For this study, approximately forty-six pilgrims were fully interviewed.

The second type of data collection, direct observation, provided a detailed description of the events which occurred and how people reacted or behaved under certain circumstances or in particular environments. There are many methods for gathering this observational data but for this study I chose to be a *participant observer*. Participant observation “simultaneously combines document analysis, interviewing of respondents and informants, direct participation and observation, and introspection” (Patton 1990, p. 206). The participant observer, therefore, “is fully engaged in experiencing the setting under study while at the same time trying to understand that setting through personal experience, observations, and talking with other participants about what is happening. The researcher shares as intimately as possible in the life and activities of the setting under study” (Patton 1990, p. 207). In participant observation the researcher is seeking to develop an insider’s perspective while maintaining the ability to describe the events for outsiders.

The last type of data collection, written documents, provided additional information that could not be obtained through the previous two methods. Although literature on the apparitions at Conyers is not widely available, historical data were collected from brochures and newspaper coverage. One article was published in *Time* magazine and the majority of the other articles were published in the *Atlanta Constitution*. The majority of the available material, however, is produced by Our Loving Mother's Children (OLMC) but this is almost exclusively testimonial in nature. Their books and journal publications relay the visionary messages and teachings of each appearance of Jesus and Mary (To Bear Witness-I and II). The videos produced by this organization serve the following three purposes. One video, *Miracle at Conyers*, serves as an introduction to the events occurring at Conyers. It speaks about the location and layout

of the Marian site, the messages that Nancy Fowler has received, and what some pilgrims have experienced at Conyers. Another video, *Why Do You Test Me?*, is available as a form of verification of the apparitions at Conyers. It shows the process that a team of scientists went through in testing the validity of Nancy Fowler's supernatural experiences. The last two videos deal strictly with the messages and testimony of Nancy Fowler and other pilgrims while at Conyers. It must be kept in mind, however, that certainly none of these publications have been written or produced from a geographical perspective.

### **3.2 Field Trips to Conyers, Georgia**

I traveled to the apparition site in Conyers, Georgia, four times during this research effort. My first trip was on 13 October 1995. This was the fifth anniversary of the apparitions which began on the same day in 1990. It also happened to be the day when Jesus and Mary announced to the visionary, Nancy Fowler, that they would no longer appear on the thirteenth of every month. At that time, the crowd was very large with an estimate of the number of pilgrims around 20,000 or more. My second trip was on 13 December 1995 and the crowd was drastically different. This time the number of pilgrims was very small. An estimate would be less than one hundred people on this date. This lower turnout could have been caused by one or more of the following: Jesus and Mary no longer appear, the timing of Christmas vacation for many people, the fact that the thirteenth fell on a Wednesday rather than a weekend, and adverse weather conditions. My third trip occurred on Sunday, 18 February 1996. I chose to go on a weekend but not on the thirteenth to see how many pilgrims came in faith on the supposed "off-apparition days." To my surprise there were approximately 250 pilgrims present on the apparition

grounds. The fourth and final trip to Conyers fell on Saturday, 13 April 1996. The crowd of pilgrims was much larger than I had expected on this trip. I would estimate that there were approximately one to 2,000 people present. I suggest this is because it was the first time since January that the thirteenth fell on a Saturday which would make traveling easier for those pilgrims who were working during the week, the weather was much nicer in April, and a national broadcasting network (TBS), had just aired a television show about apparitions in the United States in the beginning of April. On this program, Conyers was a segment highlight and it addressed all areas of the apparitions occurring there except for the fact that the monthly apparitions had ceased. I think curious people, most likely hearing of Conyers for the first time on that program, came on April thirteenth with the hope of seeing the visionary and hearing messages from Jesus and Mary.

### **3.3 Sampling Study Subjects**

In four visits to Conyers, I interviewed forty-six pilgrims. Unfortunately the interviewees were not from a completely random sample. My sample was, unfortunately, biased in that I did not interview many Hispanic pilgrims because of the potential language barrier. Since I do not speak Spanish, an interpreter would have been needed but no one was available for that task. This is a shortcoming in the research because Hispanic pilgrims constituted approximately half of the entire pilgrim population. Of the forty-six pilgrims, I interviewed six English speaking Hispanic pilgrims, but I must admit that I was more hesitant in approaching them because of the potential language barrier. In my sample I interviewed pilgrims who represented the full spectrum of people there. By this I mean I attempted to interview an equal number of young versus middle age versus elderly,

male versus female, etc. It should be noted that all of the pilgrims I interviewed were over the age of eighteen and spoke English as their primary language.

### 3.4 Interviewing

The primary focus of each trip was to interview as many pilgrims as possible about their experiences at the apparition site. I interviewed people in various ways but always in a fashion that seemed to make them most comfortable. I had a preset list of questions to move conversations along, but for the majority of the time I let the pilgrim express thoughts freely and without interruption. Most of the time I would answer the questions myself so that they felt like I was fully engaged in the conversation and willing to expose my own self, thoughts, and feelings. This seemed to put the pilgrims more at ease and willing to share their experiences with me.

The timing and location at which I interviewed pilgrims depended entirely on each individual situation. I was always careful not to disturb them in their time of prayer, in areas near other people in prayer, or as they were first entering *The Farm*. For obvious reasons, I thought interrupting quiet time or time of prayer would be quite inconsiderate and the pilgrim would not be willing to talk. As for not disturbing others while conducting an interview, this was a difficult task at times. A leisurely walk along a path to different shrines or areas of the grounds proved to be a convenient means for an interview, but the majority of the other people I spoke with were pilgrims sitting towards the back of the crowd or standing separately from other pilgrims. I did not interview people as they were coming onto *The Farm* grounds because I did not want to interrupt anyone as they were trying to get their bearing and determine where to go and what to do while on the

apparition grounds. I also did not interview anyone inside of the apparition room or on Holy Hill because these are places in which silence is supposed to be observed. Overall, the time spent with each pilgrim varied. Most interviews lasted about fifteen minutes but many did go on longer as some people were very willing to share their experiences.

### 3.5 Methodology

Creswell explains that “qualitative researchers have no single stance or consensus on addressing traditional topics such as validity and reliability in qualitative studies” (1994, p. 157). For this research effort, I used the “trustworthiness” principle and *triangulation* to determine the validity of the pilgrim responses and to draw my conclusions. The *trustworthiness principle* occurred first during the interview itself. I had to determine in the early stages of the interview whether or not the interviewee was being straightforward. This was difficult since I was dealing with thoughts, feelings, and experiences that could indeed be supernatural. *Triangulation* was also used during this research effort. *Triangulation* is “the combination of methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon. The concept of *triangulation* is based on the assumption that any bias inherent in particular data sources, investigator, and method would be neutralized when used in conjunction with other data sources, investigators, and methods” (Creswell 1994, p. 174). For this study I triangulated by using my own internal observations from my role as a participant observer in conjunction with the responses from the pilgrims in the formal interviews as a means to neutralize the inherent biases that exist in research. From this method, the convergence of pilgrim responses were identified and became the foundation for the factors that contribute to therapeutic value of Conyers’ landscape (see Chapter 8).



## CHAPTER IV: MARIAN PILGRIMAGES

Before we can understand or appreciate the events under study in Conyers, Georgia, we must first understand the nature of Marian pilgrimages in general. A Marian pilgrimage is a religious journey in which the Virgin Mary is the focal point. The present chapter will acquaint the reader with this topic and should serve as a foundation for understanding the events occurring at the Marian site in Conyers, Georgia. This chapter is structured as follows: first, the role of the Blessed Mother in the Roman Catholic Church is addressed; second, the evolution of Marian pilgrimages in general is outlined; and third, the Roman Catholic Church's stance on Marian apparitions and pilgrimages is described.

### 4.1 The Role of Mary

According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994, p. 251), "Mary's role in the Church is inseparable from her union with Christ and flows directly from it." Mary is the Church's model of faith, charity, obedience, comfort and hope, and serves as intercessor between the earthly and the Lord (Catechism 1994). Finally, the Church believes that "the Holy Mother of God, the new Eve, Mother of the Church, continues in heaven to exercise her maternal role on behalf of the members of Christ" (Catechism 1994, p. 254). The faithful believe that Mary holds extraordinary powers that can protect and save people of faith in times of crisis and it is these basic beliefs that have spurred so many Catholics to such a strong devotion to Mary.

#### **4.2 Evolution of Marian Pilgrimage**

Sandra Zimdars-Swartz tells us in her book, *Encountering Mary*, that in Christian literature, there have presumably been a large number of reports of supernatural apparitions, but before the eleventh century it is difficult to distinguish the focal person of the visitation among Jesus, the Virgin Mary, other holy persons, and angelic figures. She further explains that since the eleventh and twelfth centuries, as devotion to the Blessed Mother began to increase in Christianity, the central figure of the apparitions became Mary. This increased devotion became known as the Cult of Mary and spread very rapidly. In the sixteenth century, reports of Marian apparitions declined in most places. Zimdars-Swartz speculates that this is in connection with the Protestant Reformation and the Inquisition. However, reported Marian apparitions and public attention sharply increased in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and great masses of people began traveling to places where the Virgin Mother was reportedly appearing. According to Zimdars-Swartz (1991, p. 5), "these modern 'Marian apparitions' have become focal points for what appears to be a significant revival of interest in the supernatural in many parts of the Christian world." Over the last two centuries, this revival has seen millions of Christians travel to places where visionaries are claiming to see apparitions of and receiving messages from the Virgin Mary, Mother of God.

#### **4.3 The Roman Catholic Church's Stance on Marian Apparitions**

Although Marian apparitions have been a real and significant part of parishioners' lives for quite some time, the Roman Catholic Church has not been as supportive as believers would like. According to Zimdars-Swartz (1991), in the fourth and fifth

centuries the Catholic Church did sanction and even encourage parishioners to believe in the intercessory abilities of departed saints as well as the special powers believed to be held by Mary. But as the centuries went on, the Catholic Church placed less and less emphasis on those same teachings and beliefs. Since Pope Benedict XIV in the mid-eighteenth century, a distinction has been made in the level of approval the Church gives apparitions or other private revelations. The distinction is between the assent of the Catholic faith (*fides catholica*) and the assent of the human faith (*fides humana*). Benedict decided that after a careful investigation and subsequent permission to publicize, the revelation should only be given with the assent of human faith rather than assent of Catholic faith. Pope Benedict believed this was “for the instruction and good of the faithful” (Zimdars-Swartz 1991, p. 9). A slight change occurred in the Church’s emphasis on departed saints’, especially Mary’s, abilities to serve as intercessor in the middle of the twentieth century, however. It was in 1950 that Pope Pius XII proclaimed the Virgin Mother’s assumption into heaven. At this time Pius XII said

Finally the Immaculate Virgin, preserved free from all stain of original sin, when the course of her earthly life was finished, was taken up body and soul into heavenly glory, and exalted by the Lord as Queen over all things, so that she might be the more fully conformed to her Son, the Lord of lords and conqueror of sin and death (Catechism 1994, p. 252).

This statement proclaiming the greatness of Mary and the closeness she has to her Son may serve as the foundation of the belief that many Roman Catholic Christians share concerning the graces that they may gain through a special relationship with the Blessed Mother. In terms of Church doctrine, however, this turn towards Mary appeared to diminish after Vatican II in 1964 at which time the Church seemed to downplay Mary and

adopt the church of a more modern world promoting more ecumenical contact with non-Christians and Protestants (Silk 12 June 1994).

The final important fact to mention here is that of the thousands of apparitions that have reportedly been witnessed over the last two thousand years, only seven of these pilgrimage sites have been verified and approved by Roman Catholic authorities. In the verification process of an apparition, the local bishop is in charge of determining whether the event is occurring or not occurring and then is responsible for issuing a ruling of approval or disapproval for parishioners and pilgrims to abide by. The seven places supported by the local bishop, the Roman Catholic Church, and pilgrims from across the globe are: Rue Du Bac: Paris, France, 1830; La Salette: France, 1846; Lourdes: France, 1858; Pontmain: France, 1870; Fatima: Portugal, 1917; Beauraing: Belgium, 1932-1933; and Banneux: Belgium, 1933 (Zimdars-Swartz 1991).

## CHAPTER V: THE PILGRIMAGE TO CONYERS

Before the therapeutic landscape of Conyers, Georgia, can be described and interpreted, the reader must become more familiar with the apparition site itself. Familiarity with the site and the events that occur there provide the foundation upon which previously presented ideas and concepts can be developed. The present chapter introduces the Conyers apparition site and serves as the foundation upon which the concepts and ideas introduced in Chapter two can be expanded on later in Chapter eight. This chapter begins by presenting the relative geographic location of the apparition site and describes the county, town, and site itself. This is given so that the reader can locate the apparition site in the southeastern part of the United States and understand its physical layout. Next, the apparitions are highlighted by introducing the visionary, the messages she receives from the Virgin Mother and Jesus, and the state of the apparitions today. This sections allows the reader to be better acquainted with the supernatural phenomena that are allegedly occurring at the apparition site. The third section addresses the reaction from the Diocese of Atlanta, local authorities, and other citizens. From this section the reader should understand the opposition the apparition site faced in its early days and, even to some extent, opposition that it is still facing today. In the next section, the pilgrims are finally introduced and described in terms of age, gender, and nationality. This information is presented so that the reader is familiar with the cross section of people that make the pilgrimage to Conyers. The fifth section introduces several of the symbols and

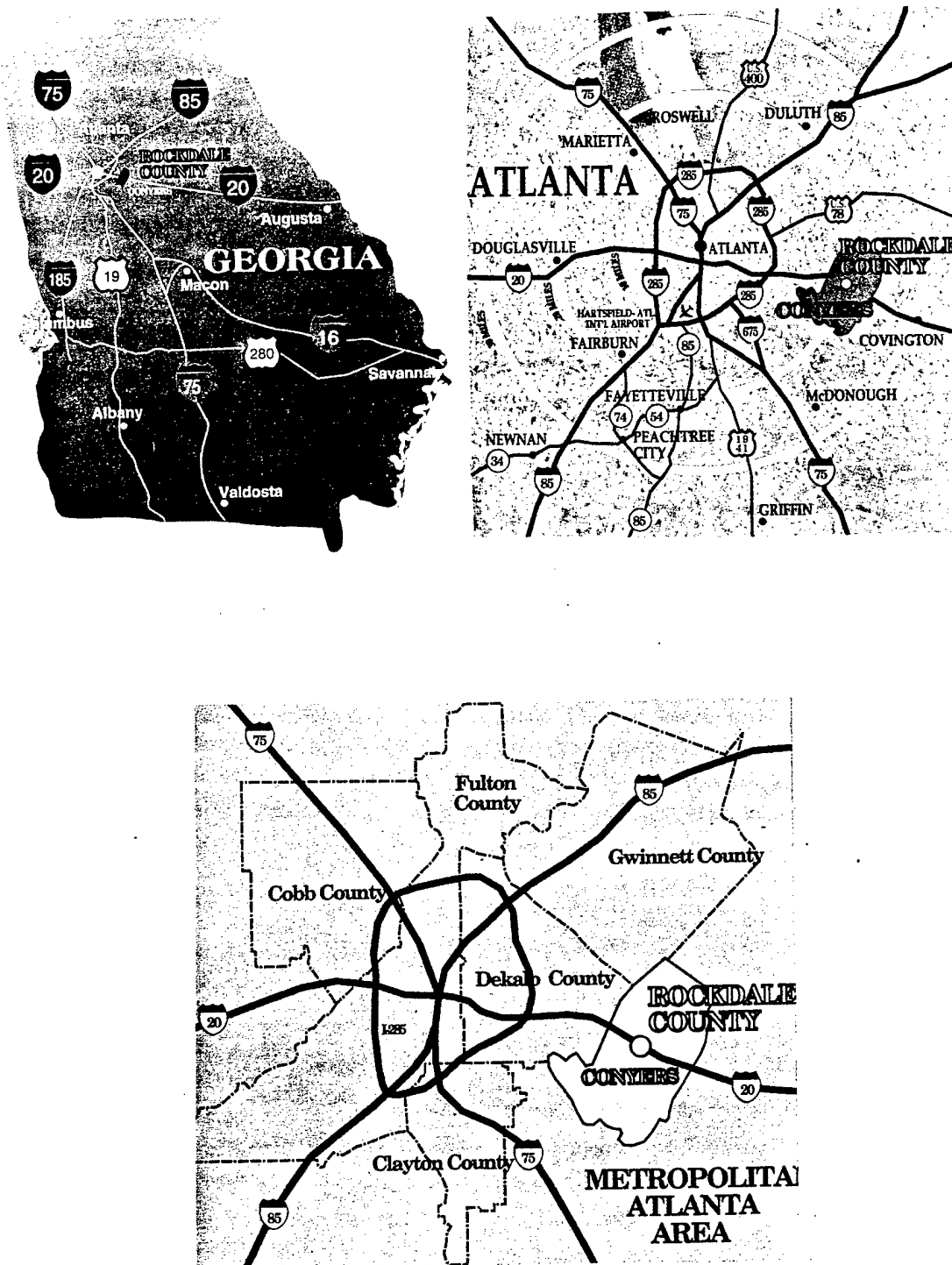
rituals that are present in Conyers and discusses why pilgrims attach significance to such religious symbols and rituals. Finally, the last section addresses the different types of miracles pilgrims have claimed to have felt during their pilgrimage to Conyers. This is given to inform the reader of the beliefs that many of the pilgrims visiting the apparition site have.

## **5.1 The Study Setting**

### **5.1.1 Rockdale County, Georgia**

Rockdale County, where Conyers is located, is in the north-central part of Georgia, twenty-four miles east of Atlanta (Figure 1). It is the smallest county in both land area and population in metro Atlanta and the second smallest in area in the entire state of Georgia. In 1990, the population of Rockdale County was 54,091. In five years, from 1990-1995, the population grew to 62,093. By the year 2000, this population is expected to expand to at least 75,000 people (Walden, 1995). Growth is certainly in the air in this county and it shows no signs of slowing. On a quick tour around the county, a visitor will see many indications of expanded residential and commercial areas that were necessary to handle the county's population growth and the visitors that came to the county for the 1996 Centennial Olympic equestrian events, mountain biking races, and the final two events of the pentathlon. Rockdale County publications boast that all the activity currently taking place throughout the county indicates a healthy local economy with far-reaching implications for the future growth and development of this area.

**Figure 1:** Maps of Georgia depicting the location of Rockdale County and Conyers



### **5.1.2 Conyers, Georgia**

The city of Conyers is a combination of a quaint town and bustling city. Since 1990, its population has grown from 7,380 to approximately 8,321 people (Walden, 1995). It is a developing city with a lot to offer its residents in terms of a rural/urban mix, public and private schools, seventy-four churches representing many denominations (Figure 2), shopping areas, and an economy that has seen a steady growth of more than 168 percent since 1970 (Fenton, 1996).

### **5.1.3 *The Farm***

*The Farm* is the location where Jesus and the Blessed Virgin Mary have been reported to appear to a housewife, Nancy Fowler, on the thirteenth of each month. The property is a large area of land that is located at 2324 White Road in Conyers (Figure 3). In July 1990, Nancy Fowler moved to this location after she found a farmhouse on a plot of land that she said she saw in a vision from Jesus (Figures 4a-b). It is in a room located in the front of this farmhouse where the apparitions actually occur. Soon after she moved in, pilgrims began traveling to her home to hear what Jesus and the Virgin Mother had to say. One pilgrim who came was Robert Hughes, a Virginia businessman. Helpers at *The Farm* explain that Mr. Hughes was so moved by the experience of the apparitions and the character of Nancy Fowler that he purchased 130 acres of land around Nancy Fowler's home in the summer of 1991 so that pilgrims could come, park their vehicles, and roam freely about the property. In addition to this donation, Hughes also gave Nancy ten thousand dollars for the initial printing of her book on the Virgin Mother's messages and

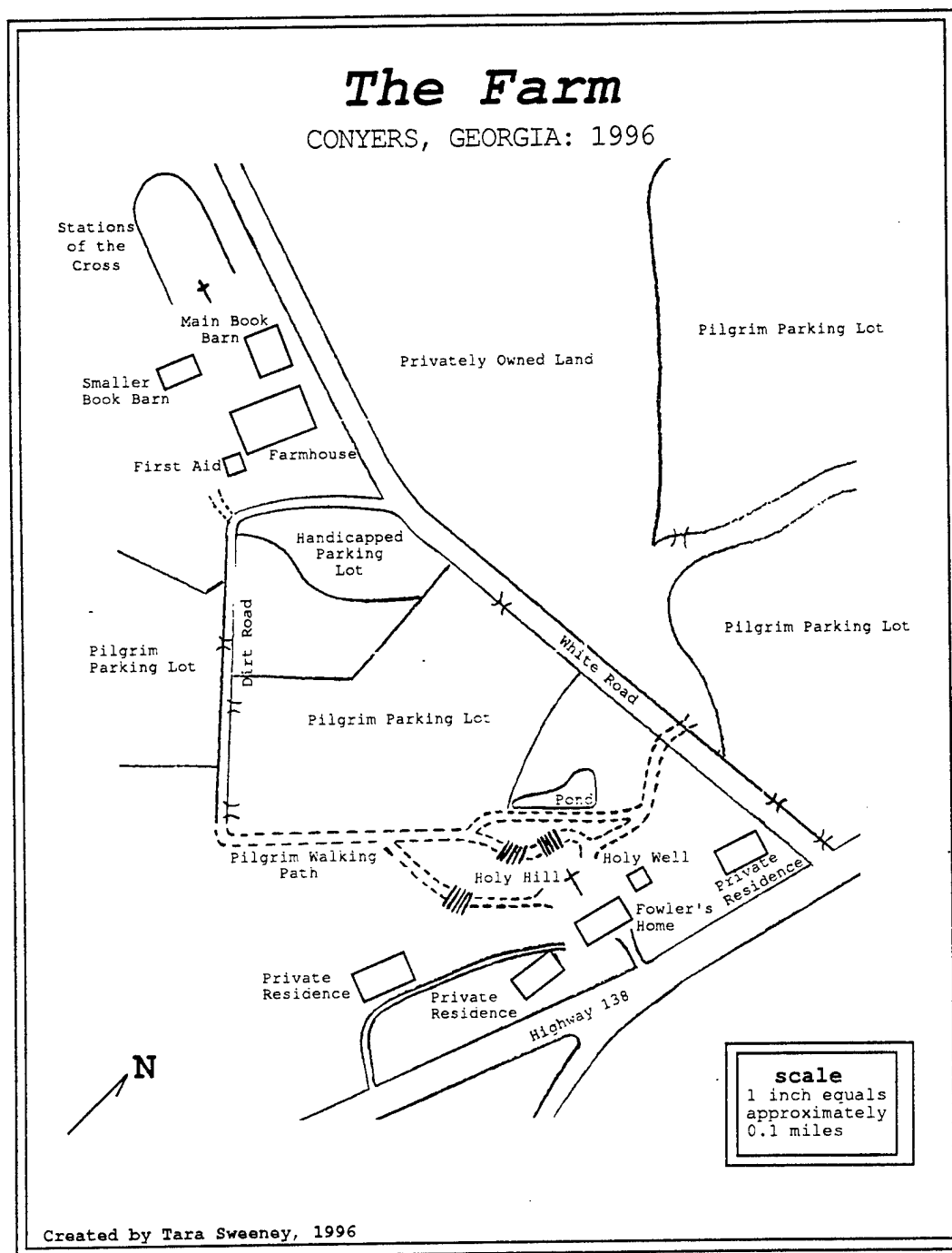


**Figure 2: Churches located in Conyers, Georgia**

Church Breakdown In Conyers,  
Georgia, According to April 1995  
Conyers Telephone Book

		% of all churches
Baptist	33	44.6
Methodist	9	12.2
Christian	6	8.1
Non-Denominational	5	6.8
Catholic	3	4.1
Presbyterian	3	4.1
Apostolic	2	2.7
Church of Christ	2	2.7
Church of God	2	2.7
Unity	2	2.7
Assembly of God	1	1.4
Christian Science	1	1.4
Episcopal	1	1.4
Jehovah's Witness	1	1.4
Lutheran	1	1.4
Mormon	1	1.4
Pentecostal	1	1.4
Total Churches In Conyers	74	100.0

**Figure 3: Map of *The Farm***





**Figure 4a:** The farmhouse where the apparitions occur.



**Figure 4b:** The farmhouse on an apparition day (Photograph courtesy of Tom Crawford).

formed the non-profit company, Our Loving Mother's Children (OLMC), that operates and maintains *The Farm* (Osinski, 13 June 1993).

The apparition site consists of only a few structures. Nancy has moved from the farmhouse to another small house (Figure 5) on a different part of the property near Holy Hill and the holy well (to be described later). The farmhouse (Figures 4a-b) is used strictly for pilgrims to come in and out of the apparition room (Figure 6a-c) as they please. The other rooms of the house are not open to the public.

Within thirty yards of the farmhouse is a refinished barn that serves as an information center where maps, prayer sheets, books, rosaries, and other items can be purchased (Figure 7). When the crowds get extremely large, a smaller open structure (Figure 8) located near the barn is also used to display and distribute the items available. In addition, a small building exists for first aid necessities (Figure 9).

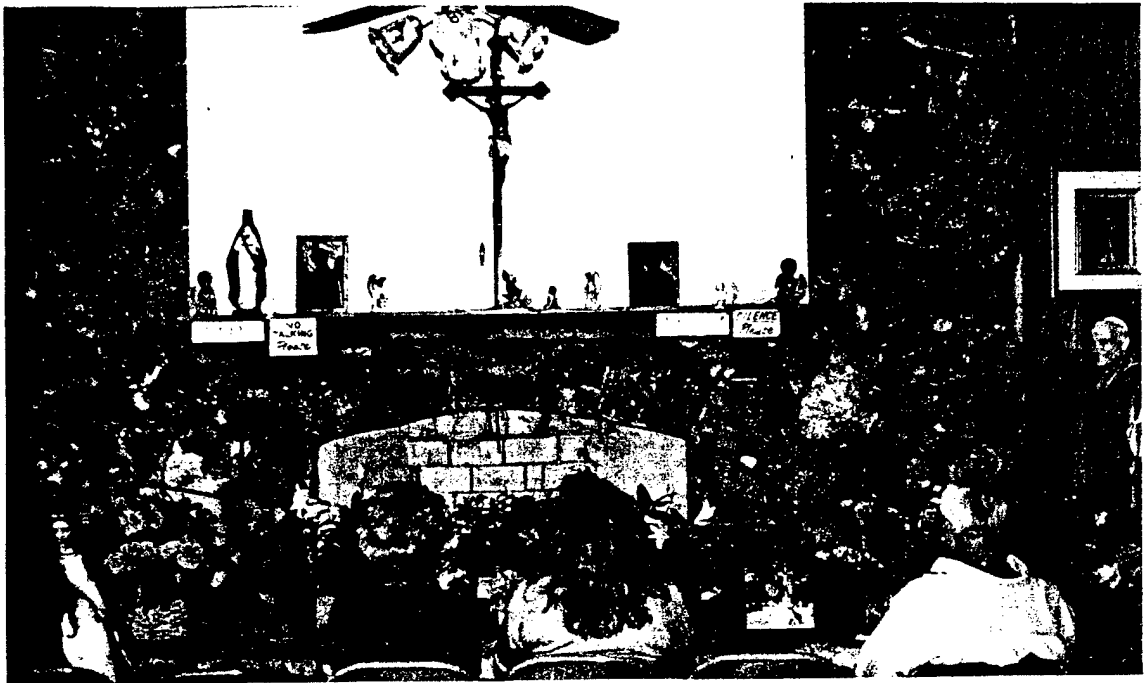
The other areas that attract interest from the pilgrims are shrines, crucifixes, and statues located throughout the property. A short walk away from the apparition room towards the backyard of the visionary's home, is an area known as Holy Hill (Figure 10). In videos produced by OLMC, Holy Hill is believed to be holy ground blessed by Jesus and can be compared to a significantly scaled down version of Mt. Krizevac in Medjugore. Atop this small hill stands a life-size replica of Jesus on the cross built upon a stone altar which is also in the shape of a cross. Here, nighttime vigils are held, prayer petitions are placed, and gifts to Jesus and Mary are left on the altar. Also in the same area are three statues, Our Lady of Fatima (Figure 11a), Our Lady Queen of Grace (Figure 11b), Our Lady Queen of Peace (Figure 11c), and the holy well (Figure 12) which is said to yield holy water blessed by a local priest and Jesus.



**Figure 5:** Nancy Fowler's house.



**Figure 6a:** Pilgrims waiting in line to see the apparition room (Photograph courtesy of Tom Crawford).



**Figure 6b:** Inside of the Apparition Room.



**Figure 6c:** The corner of the Apparition Room where Nancy Fowler traditionally receives the messages from the Virgin Mary and Jesus Christ.



**Figure 7:** The book barn located near the farmhouse.



**Figure 8:** The smaller book barn. This structure is used as an additional book holding site on apparition days.





**Figure 9:** First Aid building.



**Figure 10:** Pilgrims gather around and touch the life-size crucifix of Jesus located atop Holy Hill.



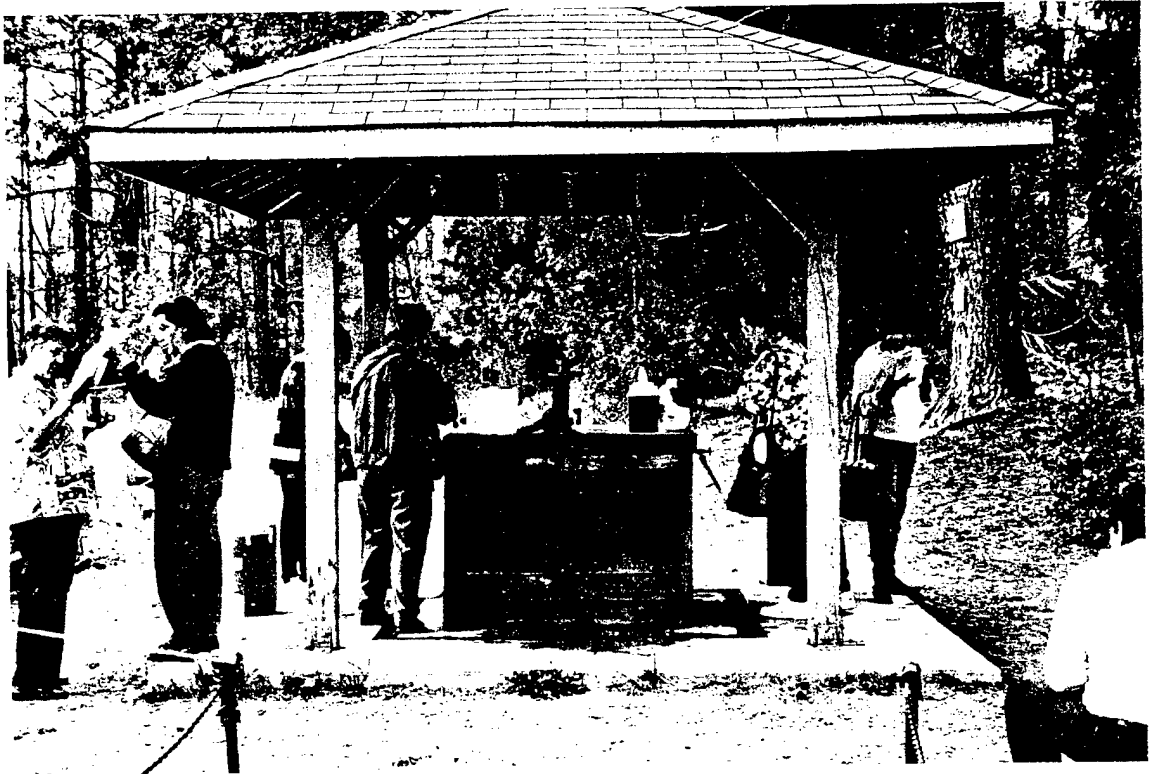
**Figure 11a:** Our Lady of Fatima.



**Figure 11b:** Our Lady Queen of Grace.



Figure 11c: Our Lady Queen of Peace.



**Figure 12:** The Holy Well. Notice the various containers to hold the water. The pilgrims believe this water was blessed by Jesus and is therefore, holy water.

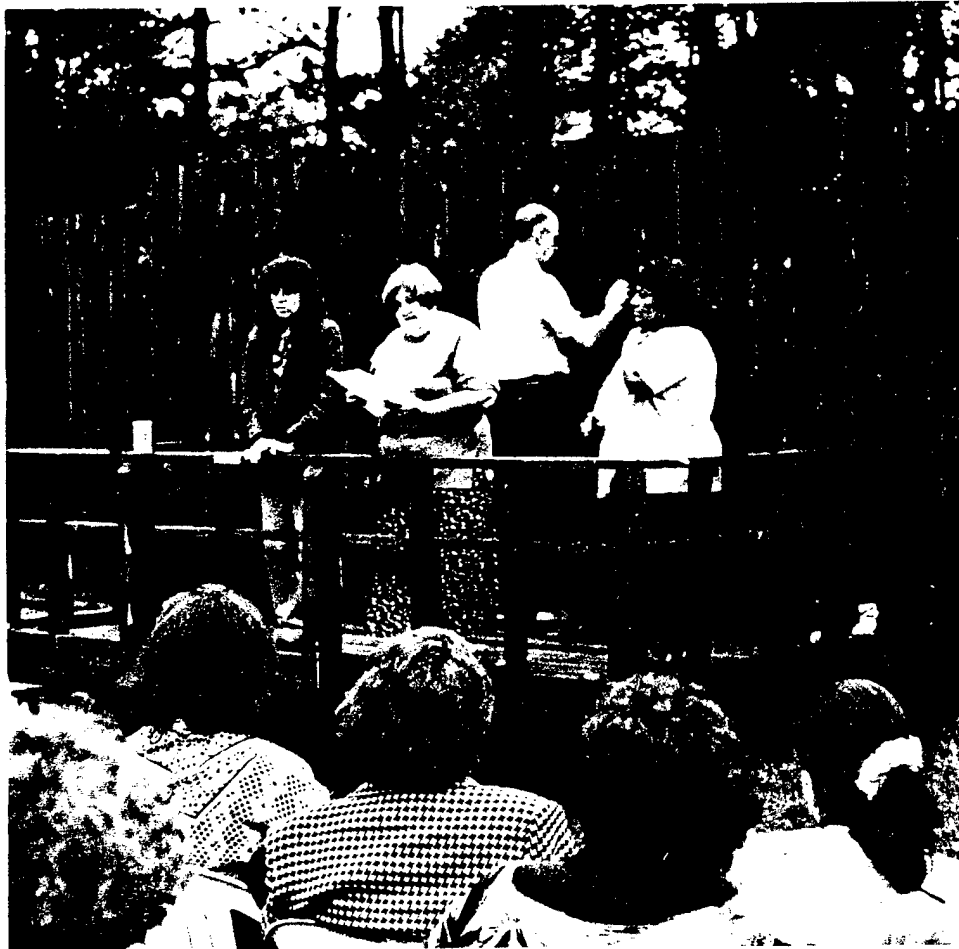
## **5.2 The Apparitions**

### **5.2.1 Nancy Fowler, the Visionary**

Nancy is a 48 year old housewife from Cambridge, Massachusetts (Figure 13). She is married to a now retired U. S. Air Force man and has two children. For the majority of her life, Nancy dedicated her time to being a housewife and nurse. In 1988, she and her family moved from Illinois to Norcross, Georgia, and then two years later, they made the move into Rockdale County to their present address (White, 14 Sept 1991). She considers herself to be an ordinary Catholic that used to just go through the motions of her faith.

In 1983, Nancy told her husband that she was seeing unbelievable things such as demons and shadows in her dreams and everyday life. She began to question her faith and doctors and friends could not provide her any solace. In the mid-1980s, Nancy finally went to a priest who told her to send the demons away in the name of God. Following that instruction and the sacrament of reconciliation, the attacks stopped. Then later, while sitting in the back of her church, she heard the voice of Jesus. He said to her "no man can comprehend the greatness of God. Do not try. Accept my peace" (OMLC video 1994). Eventually, Nancy saw Jesus. Soon thereafter, the Virgin Mary began appearing to Nancy at which time the Blessed Mother asked that She be referred to as Our Loving Mother and told Nancy that She would appear to her in times of need and on the thirteenth of each month.

Beyond this information, not much is known about Nancy Fowler. She does not conduct interviews with the press, does not do any public speaking outside of speaking to pilgrims, and, like Bernadette at Lourdes, really lives a humble life, trying to stay out of



**Figure 13:** Nancy Fowler (center, holding papers) speaks to the pilgrims from a stage adjacent to her home. (Photo courtesy of Tom Crawford).



the spotlight. In a promotional video produced by Our Loving Mother's Children, Nancy explains why she does not want articles written about her or her family; "If you meet me, you forget me, you forget my name, you've lost nothing. Well, if you meet Jesus and you forget His name, you've lost everything. So, who I am is not important and it's my prayer that today you hear only the words of our Lord and our Lady but not my words" (OLMC, 1994).

Since the apparitions began, Nancy has been under much scrutiny by reporters, the public, and the Roman Catholic Church. Through it all, she follows the directions of the local bishop concerning her experience, proclaims obedience to the Church to be of the utmost importance, and warns others to be vigilant in that regard (OMLC, 1994).

### **5.2.2 The Messages**

Although the Virgin Mary and Jesus appeared to Nancy numerous times since 1987, from October 13, 1990, to October 13, 1995, They were said to appear at Conyers regularly on the thirteenth of every month. At that time, the Virgin Mother would give messages to be relayed to the people of the United States. In general, the messages were similar to messages given at other Marian pilgrimage sites. The Blessed Mother and Jesus stress the importance of repentance, turning away from sin and Satan, and returning to God and a life lived through the soul. In an April 15, 1991, message specifically to the U.S., Mary said "the sins of this country and the sins of the world are increasing God's anger. Please tell my children. Please tell my children, come back to God. Return from their wicked, evil ways. I cannot restrain His arm much longer. Please-Please-Please listen." When I spoke with pilgrims, the messages they tended to bring up most concerned

the conclusion of the Gulf War in 1991. Mary had been in contact with Nancy throughout the war and at various times stressed that if people prayed then the war would be stopped and that she feared great bloodshed if Her children did not do this. But what pilgrims are most convinced by was the prophecy given on February 26, 1991, when Jesus said "I will stop the war this week. I will bring the war to a halt." The following evening, February 27, 1991, President Bush announced a conditional ceasefire in the war.

Another aspect stressed is the similarity between the messages the Blessed Mother gave at Fatima to the ones She's now relating at Conyers. It is believed that the thirteenth is a significant day for the Blessed Mother because Her monthly visits to Conyers began on October 13, 1990, which is the anniversary of the day when Her visits in the field at Fatima ceased on October 13, 1917. She continually urges Nancy and the faithful to reread the messages She gave at Fatima because many have them have gone unheeded. On February 17, 1991, the Blessed Mother said, "I want the world to know my appearances here are linked directly with Fatima. No other apparitions are linked more strongly with you than Fatima. The world will come to know in time." All the messages given by the Virgin Mother and Jesus are published in two journal-type books and on individual sheets of paper categorized for each month's messages.

### **5.2.3 The Status of the Apparitions Today**

Beginning in October 1990, the Virgin Mary and Jesus began appearing to Nancy at *The Farm*, at which time They said They would come again on the thirteenth of every month. They are believed to have done just that for exactly five years. On October 13, 1995, during the visitation to Nancy Fowler, the Blessed Mother revealed that She and

Jesus would no longer appear on the thirteenth of every month. The next time They would be present would be on October 13, 1996. During this hiatus, the people of America were to pray and build their faith. Nancy was instructed at that time not to speak publicly of the messages and to use this time for reflection, growth, and writing. Since the last message on 13 October 1995, the crowds have dwindled considerably. Instead of 50,000 people gathering on the thirteenth of a month, a visitor would most likely see one to two hundred faithful in the field outside the apparition room. The place itself still runs its daily operations but the helpers explain that it is a lot quieter these days and many pray for the day when so many will come in faith again.

### **5.3 Reaction to the Apparitions**

#### **5.3.1 The Diocese's Stance on the Apparitions in Conyers**

With respect to the Catholic Church, Nancy Fowler has continually said that she will follow any and all directions of the local bishop concerning her experiences. Since the apparitions began, she has seen the diocese change in its stance towards the apparitions in Conyers. In 1992, Archbishop James P. Lyke from the Catholic Archdiocese of Atlanta, was against Catholic faithful visiting the apparition site and asked fellow bishops to discourage pilgrimages to Conyers (White 14 March 1992) saying that "the authenticity of these apparitions is in grave doubt" (Osinski 14 April 1992). Then in late 1993, Archbishop Lyke died and at that time the Church had no plan to make an official inquiry into the reported sightings at *The Farm* (Osinski 13 March 1993). His follower, Bishop John F. Donoghue, although skeptical of the apparitions, finally decided in July 1993 that an investigation would begin concerning the alleged Marian apparitions at Conyers.

Currently, Bishop Donoghue still questions the events occurring at *The Farm* but both he and Nancy are working together with Nancy's local spiritual advisor, Fr. Joachim Tierney, to determine the validity of the apparition events. In the end, priests are still discouraged from leading pilgrimages to the site but Donoghue has not discouraged faithful pilgrims from traveling there.

### **5.3.2 Local Authorities and Citizens**

The apparitions brought mixed reactions from the local authorities and citizens of Conyers. The main complaint was the increase in traffic in the area when the apparitions would occur on the thirteenth of every month. With thousands of pilgrims traveling to *The Farm* the local residents not participating in the events were inconvenienced by traffic, longer waits at restaurants, and overall congestion. Local authorities, after seeing the increase in traffic as the apparition site became more well known, planned to use a state law regulating rock music festivals to limit and control the large crowds. Evidently what stopped this from being successful was the fact that the county's enforcement action was apparently taken without notifying the proper state agency. State officials then declared that the law did not apply to the crowds at Conyers and therefore could not be enforced (Osinski 27 March 1993). At the same time, the county was also throwing other roadblocks and safety procedure requirements at the apparition organizers which put into question whether *The Farm* could afford to support such a crowd. Georgia's General Assembly then kicked in a one-time grant of 100,000 dollars to "help defray costs and make the events run more smoothly" (Osinski 27 March 1993). Since 1993, there have been no major disputes between local authorities and OLMC. Helpers say that within the

last two years local officials have been helpful and supportive of the large crowds at the apparition events.

#### **5.4 The Pilgrims**

People who embark on religious pilgrimages are referred to as pilgrims. In general terms, pilgrims display many of the characteristics of the population at large. They are male and female; of varying ages; from diverse social, economic, and religious backgrounds; and from many different parts of the world. The pilgrims of Conyers, Georgia, are no exception. On the thirteenth day of any month, people with these various characteristics can be seen walking around *The Farm*. A description of some of these types of pilgrims follows.

##### **5.4.1 Age of Pilgrims**

Men and women, boys and girls, can all be seen walking, praying, socializing, and playing on the property of *The Farm*. The children have obviously accompanied their parents and while some kids participate fully in the religious events, most retreat to the surrounding woods for a playful game of hide-and-seek. It was interesting watching the children during the holy Rosary. The first thing that struck me was the proud display of the rosary and scapula both dangling around their necks. Despite the fact that the children at *The Farm* most likely did not know why they were wearing the scapula and rosary, they did wear them proudly and seemed to enjoy looking like the older pilgrims.

The second thing of note was the way the youngest pilgrims fingered their beads during the Rosary. It was very interesting to see young kids mimic the actions of their parents, older siblings, grandparents, aunts, and uncles with the completion of each prayer.

There was no doubt that many of the children involved could not truly comprehend the meaning or significance of the Holy Rosary yet many children sat there for the hour plus prayer service and obediently counted each prayer by moving their thumb.

The third aspect to address concerning the children was the complete devotion that many of them gave to Jesus and the Blessed Mother during the Holy Rosary. I watched a family, comprised of a mother, a father, three brothers (approximately 15, 12, and 7), and two sisters (approximately 9 and 5) kneel for every decade of the Holy Rosary and prayers after the Rosary was completed. This day, the prayerful time lasted for about an hour and a half. Not a single member of the family stirred during that whole time. What struck me was not necessarily the devotion of the older family members, but rather the discipline of the youngest children. Although the majority of the people at *The Farm* are engaged in prayer, there are distractions present. As mentioned before, kids the same ages as those in this particular family, can be seen running all around, yet the children of this family, and of many other families, knelt there with such devotion to Jesus and the Blessed Mother.

I have spoken of the youngest children but let me address the older children now. It is apparent that the majority of these older children, above the age of ten or twelve, have not come to *The Farm* to run around in the woods and it is probably safe to say that finding a new girlfriend or boyfriend is not on their mind either. Instead, these children wanted to come here and partake in the afternoon of prayer. They stand, kneel, and sit devoutly next to their parents, recite the prayers in a very reverent tone, and take seriously their holy time with the Blessed Mother and Jesus. While I was talking with an older lady in her fifties, she introduced me to her ten year old grand-daughter who was a very sweet girl. The granddaughter loved coming to *The Farm* and praying to the Blessed Mother and

really felt moved by being here. She, along with other members of her family, come whenever the thirteenth does not interfere with school, unless it falls on a Friday and sometimes she gets to take a day off! What was so interesting was listening to her speak so highly of the Blessed Mother at such a young age and telling me how much she likes to volunteer at *The Farm* handing out scapulas, rosaries, lawn chairs, or water. Her spirit was just so inviting and faith-filled.

The majority of the pilgrims, however, are adults. Their reasons for coming are varied and they will be discussed later in this thesis. While there were a significant number of people in their twenties, thirties, and forties, during my visits, the majority of adults were senior citizens. I suggest two reasons for this. First, many of these people are most likely retired. Therefore, they may have more flexibility in their schedules and have greater ease in taking time to travel to Conyers. The other reason has to do with the way in which older people were raised in the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church plays a much different role in people's lives today than it did prior to Vatican II. This thesis will not discuss the inner-workings of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council of the mid-1960s, but what I will touch on is how the Church has changed, not so much doctrinally, but rather practically, in terms of the make-up of its parish family. Forty years ago, Sundays, holy days, Christmas, Easter, reconciliation, and stations of the cross were attended faithfully by all parish members. Entire communities were established around the neighborhood Church and it and its members served as the central part of the community. Being a *practicing* Catholic was the only option. Today, however, that scene is remarkably different. The Catholic Church does not appear to hold the same significance for today's Catholics as it did forty years ago. Family attendance at Mass has decreased

dramatically; a child usually stops Catholic Christian Doctrine in the eighth grade; the participation in Holy Sacraments is not as emphasized in today's family; and the Church community does not gather together as it once did. Obviously these points will not be true for all families but in many cases the aforementioned tendencies are well founded. What all this means is that older people have different opinions on what it means to be Catholic, perhaps better understand the importance and obligation of honoring the Virgin Mary, and therefore come to show their devotion at Conyers.

#### **5.4.2 Gender of Pilgrims**

As is the case with many pilgrimage sites throughout the world, female pilgrims seem to be more common than male pilgrims (Zimdars-Swartz, 1991). Why this is the case is not known but again, speculation may provide some insight. First, Mary is the most revered woman in the Catholic Church. She is a symbol for all that is good and pure in the world and serves as a role model of what a Catholic Christian is to be. In a world where women have had to fight for recognition and appreciation, women may be drawn to Mary because she is such a strong and honored person in a male dominated hierarchical church. And secondly, women may be more drawn to Mary because of her feminine qualities to which they can relate. Mary epitomizes the essence of motherhood in terms of love, affection, sacrifice, and respect—all qualities which most mothers strive to perfect.

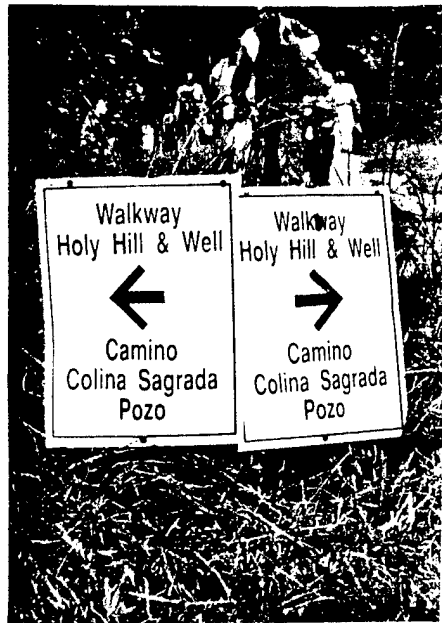
#### **5.4.3 Nationality of Pilgrims**

Pilgrims from many different countries have traveled to *The Farm* to witness the supernatural events occurring there. During my trips to *The Farm* I have taken particular notice of the breakdown of nationalities represented there. Approximately fifty percent of



the people traveling to Conyers are American which is not surprising since the apparition site is on American soil. I have spoken with pilgrims from County Mayo, Ireland; Paris, France; Quebec, Canada; and an area outside of Naples, Italy. Each of these pilgrims were actively involved in the cult of Mary in their own parishes and had heard of Conyers while speaking with fellow Marian followers. I thought this to be an interesting point that Conyers was large enough or significant enough to bring a European following.

One other significant group represented are Latin American pilgrims. On every trip to the area I have counted at least 2 buses from Mexico carrying many pilgrims. I suggest two reasons for this. First, Hispanic people, on the whole, have the reputation of being strong Catholics who continually live their faith. In addition to this, Hispanics have always had a strong following and reverence for the Virgin Mary. It was therefore not surprising to see such a large Hispanic population present at the apparition site. In fact, the entire prayer service, Rosary, and Marian messages are said once in English and then once in Spanish. Prayer sheets, signs (Figures 14a-c) videos, and books are even reprinted in Spanish to accommodate the Spanish-speaking pilgrims. The second reason is the location of this apparition site in the southeastern part of the United States. Guadalupe, near Mexico City, does have its own Marian apparition site, but the only other apparition site in the southern United States is in Miami, Florida where a large Hispanic population exists. The helpers at *The Farm* have said that the large Hispanic population traditionally comes from Florida, Texas, and Mexico and when they do come it is predominantly by bus with a large group. Helpers add that after talking with pilgrims they reveal that Conyers is a convenient and relatively short trip for them to make to see a popular apparition site in the U.S.



(a)



(b)



(c)

**Figures 14a, b, c:** This is a sampling of the various signs located throughout *The Farm* to guide and inform the pilgrims (Photographs courtesy of Tom Crawford).

## **5.5 Religious Symbols and Rituals at Conyers**

Religious symbols and rituals can be witnessed at many Marian pilgrimage sites throughout the world. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994, p. 297) explains that in human life, signs of the human world (i.e. signs, symbols, and ritual) “occupy an important place. As a being at once body and spirit, man expresses and perceives spiritual realities through physical signs and symbols. As a social being, man needs signs and symbols to communicate with others, through language, gestures, and actions. The same holds true for his relationship with God.” The *Catechism* (1994, p.297) further explains that “the great religions of mankind witness to this cosmic and symbolic meaning of religious rites.” In particular, “the liturgy of the [Catholic] Church presupposes, integrates and sanctifies elements from creation and human culture, conferring on them the dignity of signs of grace, of the new creation in Jesus Christ” (Catechism 1994, p. 297). This section describes the religious symbols and Roman Catholic rituals that are present and practiced by pilgrims visiting *The Farm*.

### **5.5.1 Rosary Beads**

Rosary beads are a string of beads used for counting prayers (Figure 15). They are used while reciting the holy Rosary, in this case, a devotion consisting of the recitation or meditation of the sacred mysteries. The devotion to the holy Rosary has been treasured in the Roman Catholic Church for centuries. It is a summary of Christian faith inspired by the Holy Bible and calls to mind the most important events in the lives of Jesus and Mary. These events are called the sacred Mysteries and are divided into three groups of decades:



**Figure 15 :** A pilgrim holds various sets of rosary beads during the recitation of the Rosary at noon. (Photograph courtesy of Tom Crawford).

the five Joyful, the five Sorrowful, and the five Glorious Mysteries. Each decade consists of the recitation of one "Our Father," ten "Hail Marys," and one "Glory be to the Father."

### **5.5.2 Scapula**

A scapula is made of two flat, small rectangle pieces of fabric and plastic with a religious scene imprinted on it that are connected with two small cords. It is worn around the neck with one rectangle placed on the chest and one on the back. Its purpose is to remind you of the importance of Mary in the Church and her role as an intercessor to Jesus and the Lord. People also say that only those wearing the scapula on the Day of Judgment will be protected from the ensuing death and destruction. Traditionally, Catholic children receive a scapula and rosary on their First Communion around the second grade. This having been the time when I received mine, I remember being excited although I certainly did not know what I was supposed to do with them. It was the "cool" Catholic thing to wear your scapula and rosary.

### **5.5.3 Holy Water**

According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, water symbolizes "the Holy Spirit's action in Baptism, since after the invocation of the Holy Spirit it becomes the efficacious sacramental sign of new birth: just as the gestation of our first birth took place in water, so the water of Baptism truly signifies that our birth into the divine life is given us in the Holy Spirit" (1994). Overall, water is important in many religions throughout the world and particular emphasis is placed on its sacredness and healing powers. It is believed that at *The Farm*, Jesus blessed the well water in Nancy's yard and has promised to heal His "children who come in faith." In the Catholic faith in particular, holy water is

used at various times including during Mass, baptism and other sacramental services. It is believed that Jesus said “draw the holy water from the well to bless your families and home.” It is important to note that despite the fact that officials and scientists have said the water from the Holy well at *The Farm* is contaminated with coliform bacteria and is unsatisfactory for drinking, thousands of pilgrims continue to fill any available empty containers ranging from small soda bottles to large Gatorade coolers (Osinski 15 February 1992).

#### **5.5.4 Photographs**

Automatic and Polaroid cameras have long been part of a pilgrim’s travel items at many Marian pilgrimage sites throughout the world. Conyers is no exception to this. Many pilgrims bring their cameras to photograph the sun, hoping to record some proof that the Virgin Mary had been there. According to Nolan and Nolan (1989, p. 309 ) “photos characterized by lens flare or circles around the sun are highly prized and are passed around among pilgrims traveling to shrines all over Europe.” At Conyers, pilgrims feel blessed if they capture a picture of an illuminated rectangle or door-like figure because it signifies the door through which Mary traveled. Any picture with a sunburst, an array of clouds in the form of a heavenly host, or an image of the Blessed Mother attracts great attention from nearby pilgrims. Pilgrims with particularly vivid images usually take the photo back home with them and return with multiple copies to give to or trade with other pilgrims. Accompanying each swap is the story behind when, how, and why the picture was taken along with an interpretation of what the photographer sees in the photo (Figures 16a-g).



**Figure 16a:** This photograph of the Virgin Mary was taken by a pilgrim on an apparition day (Photograph courtesy of Tom Crawford).



**Figure 16b:** Other pilgrims admired and photographed the same photo as the pilgrim held it in the air (Photograph courtesy of Tom Crawford).

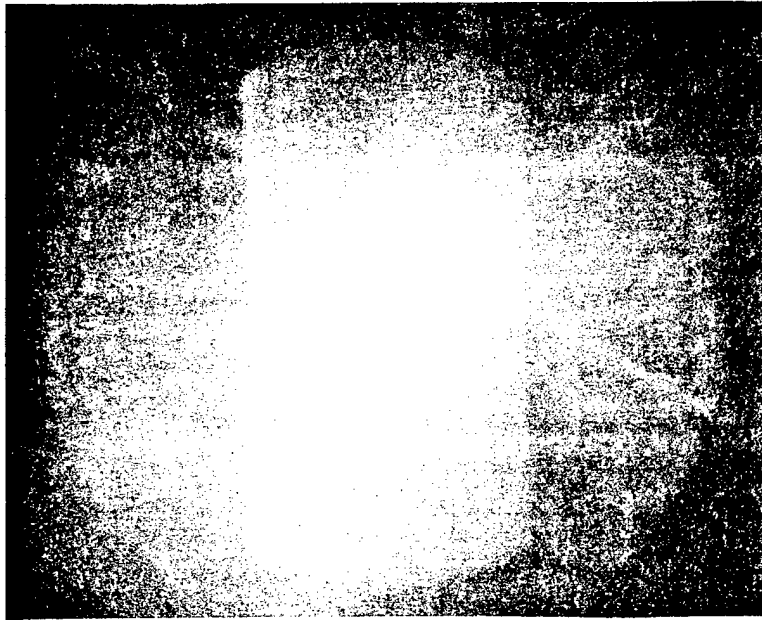


**Figure 16c:** This photograph was taken on Holy Hill. Notice the gold sparkles in the upper left-hand corner. The pilgrim who took this picture believes the sparkle is gold dust coming down from heaven.



**Figure 16d:** To the pilgrims, this is a unique and special photo. The original picture is in the center of the top row. It is believed to depict an image of Mary. The other three photos are photographs of that center one. What the pilgrims believe is so special is that each of the three secondary pictures captured a different image and array of light than the original.





**Figure 16e:** This is a picture of “the door” that often appears in pilgrims’ photos.



**Figure 16f:** The pilgrim who took this photograph believes he captured an image of the Virgin Mary just below the sun.



This is a copy of a very "unusual" polaroid picture that I took at Holy Hill, Conyers, GA on 9/13/94. The pregnant woman in the blue dress is my sister-in-law, Sonja LaBerge. Sonja is not Catholic and was very skeptical - this was her first trip. On the way to Conyers from Pensacola I prayed that Sonja's heart would somehow be touched during this trip. After the rosary, we went to Holy Hill to pray the Chaplet of Divine Mercy at 3 PM but we were too late so we joined the other pilgrims in song during which I placed a small white statue of the Infant of Prague on the altar.

After the songs, Sonja knelt at the altar to pray and I decided to take a picture as a memento of the trip. From the foot of the altar I took this photo and as the image developed it took my breath away and Sonja was overcome with emotion. There were many witnesses there that day.

This picture has brought many blessings to Sonja and her baby and has meant for our family that all life is precious in God's eyes including the life of the unborn. The transparent image covers Sonja and her baby then stops underneath where she is carrying the baby. It also envelops the statue of the baby Jesus Infant of Prague. Sonja's baby is due Dec 10th. The Feast of the Immaculate Conception is Dec 8th. The picture was taken on the last day of the Cairo Conference. There are many details about this picture that suggest "babies" & "mothers" & "life".

Monique Hutchinson

**Figure 16g:** A Conyers testimony.

## 5.6 Miracles Witnessed at Conyers

As is the case at many Marian pilgrimage sites, pilgrims claim to be witness to a number of miraculous events that occur either during their trip, in the midst of an actual apparition, or sometime after they have returned home. Conyers is no exception. The purpose of presenting these beliefs is not to verify the authenticity of the miracles; rather it is to portray the strong sense of spiritual and emotional connection the pilgrims have to the apparitions by believing in the miracles.

### 5.6.1 Healing

According to the pilgrims of Conyers, *The Farm* is a place of spiritual, mental, and even physical healing in varying degrees. Despite thousands of reports of cures at various pilgrimage sites throughout the world, relatively few have ever been officially classified as miracles by the Catholic Church. Nevertheless, pilgrims relate stories of friends, family members, and strangers who have had spiritual transformations, supernatural encounters, and miraculous physical healing while at *The Farm*. The general information flyer given to each pilgrim when coming to *The Farm* even has a section that reads as follows:

**IMPORTANT!** Any pilgrims having miraculous physical healings or conversions please write your testimony and mail to *Our Loving Mother's Children*, P.O. Box 309, Conyers, GA, 30207 for potential future review by the Church. Please mark your envelope "Testimony." Share your gift. Please help!

Up to this time, helpers at *The Farm* say that there have been seventeen cases of physical healing reported and at least initially investigated.

### **5.6.2 Rosaries turning to Gold**

A phenomenon that has been witnessed at many Marian pilgrimage sites around the world involves the turning of silver rosary beads to gold during an apparition. While speaking with pilgrims at Conyers, I was told many stories about times, when during a visitation, rosary beads had either taken on a gold-like color completely or at least a hint of a gold luster could be found. During recitation of the Rosary you can see the pilgrims holding their rosaries in the air for Mary to bless, some in the hopes of having “proof” that the Virgin Mother was present. From one of *The Farm*’s helpers I learned that gold and in particular gold dust is believed to be a symbol from heaven of the Virgin Mother’s presence. This person even gave me a photograph taken at night near Holy Hill. The picture is believed to depict gold dust falling from the night sky (See Figure ).

### **5.6.3 Cross Silhouettes in the Sky**

On a couple of occasions, pilgrims have witnessed a distribution of clouds that have taken on the silhouette of a cross in the sky. One such occurrence happened after Jesus and Mary supposedly said it would just above Holy Hill. *The Farm* helpers explain that it was an incredible sight and “a true sign from God that They were present.” Other pilgrims periodically photograph clouds that they believe have a similar distribution to that of a cross.

### **5.6.4 Miracle of the Sun**

The miracle of the sun is another phenomenon that has been reported to occur at many pilgrimage sites around the world, most notably at Fatima and Medjugore. The miracle of the sun is an event that occurs when the sun is usually high in the sky (around

noon) and appears to be spinning, dancing, or falling towards earth. During this event, witnesses are said to be able to look directly at the sun without harm being done to their eyes. Oftentimes, as in Fatima, pandemonium can break out as witnesses believe that the sun is falling towards earth, ensuring instant peril. Although a date is not known, in one of OLMC videos, a recording of a miracle of the sun is shown through a home video camera in which the bright midday sun dances in and out of the lens' view while in the background you can hear hundreds of pilgrims, shouting, gasping, and snapping photographs as if they are seeing the same phenomenon that the camera is recording.

#### **5.6.5 Scent of Roses**

Another sign that the Virgin Mother is present is an indisputable scent of roses that can be smelled during an apparition event. One pilgrim I spoke with told me that she had never been to Conyers nor believed in what was happening until she came one morning, smelled the roses, and began looking for the ventilation system that was piping the smell in. When she learned that *The Farm* had no such ventilation system, she dropped to her knees, began to cry, and has been back to *The Farm* every month since.

## CHAPTER VI: THE LIFE OF A CONYERS PILGRIM

In April 1996, the thirteenth fell on a Saturday and I, like many others pilgrims, decided to make the pilgrimage to Conyers, Georgia. The following is my account of what I did during my weekend stay at the pilgrimage site. I share this personal account with the reader for two reasons. First, after having been a pilgrim to this apparition site, I have concluded that I would never have truly understood what a pilgrimage to Conyers was like if I had not personally experienced it. Understandably, the readers of this thesis will most likely not be able to immerse themselves into the pilgrim life as I did and so this is my attempt at bringing the life of a pilgrim to the reader. Second, in his book, *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods* (1994, p.202), Patton explains that “the purpose of observational data is to describe the setting that was observed, the activities that took place in that setting, the people who participated in those activities, and the meanings of what was observed from the perspective of those observed.” This personal account completely describes the research setting, the activities that are occurring there, and those who are involved in the activities and places the terms, rituals, and other concepts presented earlier in this thesis into the context of the pilgrim experience at *The Farm*. It is in this section that, according to Patton, the value of observational data is impacted. He concludes that “. . . observation permits the reader to enter into and understand the situation described. The value of observational data. . . is that evaluation users can come to understand program activities and impacts through detailed descriptive

information about what has occurred in a program and how the people in the program have reacted to what has occurred" (Patton 1994, p.203).

### **6.1 Friday, 12 April 1996**

I left Carrboro, North Carolina, in the morning and arrived in Conyers, Georgia, in mid afternoon. I drove directly to the Gordon's house where I stayed for the weekend. Susan Gordon and her mother, Dee, moved to Conyers just a couple of years ago. They moved to their current home so they could become actively involved in the apparition events. Since their arrival in the small town, Susan and Dee have become volunteers at *The Farm* and have opened their home to pilgrims like me. I met Susan and Dee during an earlier trip to *The Farm* and after talking to them for about a half hour, they graciously welcomed me into their home whenever I was in need of a place to stay.

After settling in at the Gordon's house, I drove about a mile to *The Farm*. When I arrived, I was surprised to see the number of people already present on the grounds. This was the first time I had been at the apparition site before the thirteenth of the month. As I toured the area, I counted approximately a hundred pilgrims walking along the path and visiting the sacred sites. I began my day in the apparition room which is located in the front room of the small farm house. I sat with five other pilgrims in the silent room and watched my fellow pilgrims as they prayed in silence. I saw an old man kneel on the carpet, shake his hands to the ceiling, and cry as he held his heart. I saw a women in her thirties sit as still as could be in one of the folding chairs with the most peaceful smile on her face. I looked and admired the many pictures depicting scenes of Jesus and Mary and smelled the many flowers still in bloom from Easter weekend. I also prayed for quite some time. Occasionally a child would whisper something to his mother, the door would

open and close, and a snapshot would be taken, but I mostly sat and enjoyed the silence of the room. The room is incredible—the silence literally envelops you.

I then left the apparition room and walked towards the book shop about thirty yards away. There I looked over the items to see if anything new was available. This trip, I did not find anything that I was interested in. As I left the building and walked towards the Stations of the Cross, I placed some money in one of the blue donation boxes. No money is ever asked for at *The Farm*. The items available to the pilgrims and the daily operation of *The Farm* are paid for through the donations of the pilgrims.

I walked across the field and knelt and prayed in front of the cross in the center of the field (Figure 17). I watched as the rosary, hung around its beams, swung in the light breeze of the day. After a few words of prayer, I proceeded around the field to participate in the Stations of the Cross. The Stations of the Cross is a devotion to the Sacred Passion, in which the prayerful accompany, in spirit, the Blessed Lord in His sorrowful journey from the house of Pilate to Calvary, and meditate on His sufferings and eventual death. Having spent time there I decided to walk around the grounds.

I first went to a site adjacent to the Stations area. This new site is not cleared like the field for the Stations is. Instead, it is a rocky nook tucked away in a lightly wooded area. This place is interesting because a waterfall existed there until just a couple of years ago. Since that time, however, the waterfall has dried up and a path of smoothed boulders is left. This area is where most of the children disappear to while their parents are praying with the crowd of other pilgrims. It was actually because of the children that I first found this spot. After seeing streams of kids coming from and going to the path, I asked one of the children what was down there. She willingly showed me how to get to the spot and





**Figure 17:** The last station in the Stations of the Cross.

explained that it was a dried up waterfall that she used to sit and watch. Now she explained, it was a place for them to play hide and seek. On a day like today it was very peaceful back there because there weren't many kids running around. I sat down on a bench for a little while and as I left the area, I walked around to read some of the prayers that had been nailed to many of the trees.

I then decided it was time to go to Holy Hill. Along the way I talked with a pilgrim and listened to his story. After speaking with him, I noticed a large open field that I hadn't seen before because it was usually reserved for parking. I walked toward the far side of the field and looked out into the distance. For the first time I noticed the variable terrain of the area. At this location, I sat under a tree for awhile, relaxed, and enjoyed the spring day. I watched as wild turkeys ran around and squawked at the intruder on their private land. After realizing I had probably riled them up enough, I decided it was time to go to Holy Hill.

I got back on the dirt and rocky path to Holy Hill and arrived about five minutes later. According to the helpers and signs at *The Farm* the travel time on the path from the apparition room to Holy Hill and back is one rosary. I have not tried this out yet. As I approached Holy Hill, I was greeted by signs in English and in Spanish saying "Silence Please, This is Holy Ground" (Figure 14b). As I read those signs I was reminded of a song sung by John Michael Talbot, a Roman Catholic singer, entitled "Holy Ground." Hearing those words in my head made me feel so relaxed. It helped me get into a spiritual frame of mind as I stepped onto the ground blessed from above.

I walked to the crucifix on the top of the small hill. The crucifix stands atop a stone platform in the shape of a cross. The wood carving of Jesus on the cross is very life-

like. I sat near the crucifix for just a few moments. I was there long enough to observe the prayer petitions that had been placed between Jesus' feet and the cross itself and to see the new gifts that had been placed on the stone altar since the last time I had been there. Before I walked away, I went to the crucifix crowded with people, worked my hand through the people, and placed my hand on Jesus' feet and prayed silently. With that, I walked to the Holy Well.

The Holy Well is a simple well system that brings holy water, blessed by Jesus, to the pilgrims. Pilgrims bring milk jugs, Gatorade coolers, soda bottles, and other containers to pour the holy water into. I brought and filled a quart sized water bottle. I don't know exactly what I'll do with the holy water but it's nice to know I have some! I do, however, bless myself and anyone I'm with with the holy water while I'm there.

Having gone to the well, I walked around Nancy Fowler's house and over to the Fatima statue of the Virgin Mary. She was adorned with flowers as always and people were huddled around her. I stood back and watched the pilgrims as they flocked to her. I decided that my personal time at *The Farm* should come to an end because I wanted to meet Susan and Dee for Mass and Adoration at St. Pius Catholic Church located in Conyers. So, I and surprisingly many other pilgrims, made the walk from Holy Hill back to where our cars were parked.

Mass at St. Pius began at seven o'clock. As we arrived at the church I noticed many faces that I had seen earlier at *The Farm*. There was a good sized crowd for an evening weekday mass. Many of these people even stayed for the hour of Adoration after the Mass. Adoration is when the body of Christ is placed on the altar table for all the parishioners to worship and acknowledge the greatness of the Lord. It is an hour of silent

prayer paying homage to the presence of the Lord and signifying our humility before Him. I had never really participated in adoration before so this was a new but delightful experience for me.

Around nine o'clock, we returned to the Gordon's home. Susan wanted to show me Holy Hill at night since I had never seen it before. As we approached Holy Hill a beautiful candlelight vigil was being held by approximately fifty pilgrims. The scene was breathtaking. We got there just in time to hear the pilgrims pray the Chaplet of Divine Mercy. I was awed. I looked up from the crucifix and the wooded backdrop to see a clear night sky with the moon and stars shining so brightly. I was completely taken in by the spirituality of the night. I never uttered a prayer while I was on Holy Hill. All I did was sit and listen.

After a short time, we made our way towards the Fatima statue and we knelt there in awe of the way pilgrims had arranged candles around the base. The flickering of the flames made the Virgin Mother come alive. My experiences at the statue that night are not to be put in words but I know that that night confirmed why I love this place so much. I love the serenity and the spirituality this small farm offers me. It allows me to take a step back from "reality" and jump into a world unlike any I have been a part of. I love *The Farm*. I love being in the apparition room. It's so peaceful and faith-filled. But I equally love the trees, the fields, the birds chirping, and the planes flying overhead. Nature makes me feel like I'm more in touch with God. I feel when I'm in the woods or just in the wild somewhere that I'm completely in His presence. It's a humbling yet delightful experience that I hope will never end.

## 6.2 Saturday, 13 April 1996

I got up around eight o'clock and went directly to *The Farm*. I would normally have gone to the Monastery of the Holy Spirit located a few miles away from *The Farm* like many pilgrims do. The monastery is very pretty. It is very simple and sits on a very nice plot of land adjacent to a wooded area and a beautiful lake. People are welcome to walk freely about its grounds. The monks there have been very supportive of Nancy and her being a visionary. Besides the beautiful scene, the monastery also has a good sized gift shop that attracts many people wishing to purchase books, hand-made items, and holy water bottles, as well many other items. That Saturday, however, I did go directly to *The Farm*. For much of the morning I sat at Holy Hill at the base of the crucifix and wrote in my personal journal about the previous night. It was nice to recollect all that had happened. I spent the rest of the morning talking to pilgrims and listening and sharing stories. The morning quickly passed and before I knew it, it was noon. All the pilgrims gathered, as if on cue, around the farm house and prayed aloud the rosary. Decades of the rosary were said in a variety of languages. It was really beautiful. What I was most struck by, however, were the number of pilgrims there on that day. It was incredible. Since the apparitions ceased in October, the subsequent months saw the thirteenth day characterized by a greatly diminished size of the crowds. Usually about two or three hundred people would come in faith each month, knowing that the Virgin Mary would not appear as she had before, to pray the rosary together. That April thirteenth, the crowd was well over a thousand people. The grass parking lots were full of cars and buses again. I think the smiles on the faces of *The Farm* helpers told the real story. Everyone was so delighted to see so many people come in faith.

The rosary was then completed and pilgrims milled about showing Polaroids of the sun to each other. The trading of pictures is an incredible sight. People from all ages get involved in the taking and trading of pictures. Sometimes I wonder if I'm at a baseball card show. Nonetheless, experiences are shared and interpretations are given of what everyone sees in each picture. Some pictures delimit images that are clear as day; others need a little bit more explanation. I always leave with about ten or so new snapshots to add to my collection. After trading pictures, most pilgrims begin to pack up and start the trek back to their homes. It seems that the exit from *The Farm* usually begins about an hour after the rosary is completed. I left about an hour or so after the last prayers were said. I said goodbye to many of my new friends at the pilgrimage sight and wished them a safe journey home. I said goodbye to the Gordons hoping that I would be down again soon to see them. Then, I went to my car and started the long drive home. I left this incredibly spiritual world that I had been living in for two days and carefully entered back into the "real" world.

## **CHAPTER VII: QUESTIONS ASKED OF THE PILGRIMS AND SELECTED RESPONSES**

The following chapter presents the questions I asked the pilgrims during the interviews and the selected responses that I think best illustrate the spectrum of replies given by the pilgrims. These responses are an integral part of this study and serve as the foundation upon which conclusions are drawn. The questions asked are divided into five different sections. Within each section, the rationale for why each question was asked is provided.

### **7.1 Opening Questions**

The first five questions were designed to gain a better understanding of who the pilgrim was that I was interviewing. Specifically, the opening questions were basic demographic questions addressing age, sex, nationality, homeland, current place of residence, and primary language spoken by the pilgrim. These questions were also helpful in diversifying those I interviewed and identifying their responses later in the study. The opening questions were as follows:

#### **What is the gender of the pilgrim?**

This question was obviously never asked but was noted during each interview. During the time spent at *The Farm*, I interviewed more women than men (28 to 18). Gender of the pilgrims was more fully described in section 5.4.2.

**What is the age of the pilgrim?**

This question will not be addressed since it was expanded on in section 5.4.1.

Briefly, the ages of pilgrims varied from infants to elderly. As mentioned previously in chapter 5, the majority of the pilgrims were adults, specifically senior citizens.

**What is the nationality of the pilgrim?**

This question has also been addressed in section 5.4.3 so it will not be discussed in detail here. In general, fifty percent of the sampled pilgrims were American while the majority of the rest of the pilgrims were primarily Hispanic. On occasion there were pilgrims traveling to Conyers from Europe but primarily the pilgrims were American and Hispanic.

**Where do you presently live?**

Primarily, this question was asked to see how far people were traveling to come to the apparition site. Most of the pilgrims I interviewed were from the continental United States, specifically the southern states. There were, however, interviewees from Washington state, the New England states, Michigan, and Colorado. As mentioned before, I also spoke with pilgrims from outside the United States from Canada, Mexico, and Europe.

**What is the primary language spoken in your home?**

This was simply an interest question asked of the pilgrims. All of the pilgrims I interviewed responded that the primary language spoken in their homes was English.



## 7.2 The Second Set of Questions

In continuing with the opportunity to get more acquainted with the pilgrims, the next set of questions addressed the pilgrims' religious lives. These questions are slightly more involved than the previous questions so the rationale for each question will be given after the question has been presented.

### **Do you belong to a particular denomination?**

Asking if the pilgrim belonged to a particular denomination let me know if the person I was speaking with was Catholic or not. I think this is an important point since it would seem that most pilgrims traveling to a Marian apparition site would be Catholic. There are those of other denominations who do attend but they presumably represent the minority of pilgrims present. Of the forty-six pilgrims I interviewed, forty-four of them were Catholic, one was Lutheran, and the other was Episcopalian.

### **How long have you been associated with this denomination? Are you active in your Church? Do you attend church regularly?**

In discussing how long they have been associated with a particular denomination, their activity in their church, and their weekly attendance, I was hoping to elucidate their level of commitment to and subsequent role in their religious community. In my experience, it has usually been the most active members of a parish community that dominate and are most willing to organize, volunteer, and support religious events such as pilgrimages. Answers to this question varied greatly ranging from not considering themselves a practicing Catholic to them being the most active in their community. On the whole, however, the majority of the pilgrims interviewed considered themselves to be practicing Catholics who are fairly active in their parish and attend Mass every Sunday.

### **How would you characterize your faith currently?**

When I asked pilgrims about their faith, I was hoping to gain insight as to why they might be at the apparition site. I think pilgrims who characterize themselves as people of strong faith are probably active in the cult of Mary and/or their religious communities and gain from *The Farm* the momentum to continue such activities. Those pilgrims who explain they don't feel as strong as they would like to be are probably hoping *The Farm* and the events occurring there would spark their religious life. After interviewing the sample of pilgrims, this rationale seemed to be true.

### **7.3 The Third Set of Questions**

The next set of questions dealt with why the pilgrims traveled to *The Farm*, what they did while they were there, and what they were hoping to gain from the experience. For this section, rationale for the question will first be given followed by actual responses from various pilgrims.

#### **What was the primary purpose of your trip? Why have you come to *The Farm*?**

In asking the primary purpose of the trip and why they were here I wanted to see if coming to *The Farm* was a priority for them or if it was just a stop along the way to another destination. The following are responses to these questions:

- “We came to see the Blessed Virgin Mother and to feel Her graces.”
- “I was on business in Atlanta but heard of this place through a friend of mine.”
- “I came to pray for my sister who has been sick.”
- 
- “*The Farm* provides me a serene, peaceful, and spiritual place that I can enjoy and relax away from my normal, everyday life.”
- “Doctors can't help my sister so I thought I should come here and pray for her recovery.”

-“I came to see what the hype was about.”

**How many times have you been to *The Farm*? How did you travel to *The Farm*?**

How many times the pilgrim came provided the opportunity to know how familiar the pilgrim was with this apparition site and what occurs here.

-“Yes, this is my first time.”

-“No, this is my fourth time.”

-“No, I come every month even though the visitations have stopped.”

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-“By car.”

-“By bus.”

-“By plane.”

**Did you have any expectations of Conyers and *The Farm* before you came? Were those expectations met?**

Asking the pilgrims if they had any expectations upon coming to the apparition site helped to give me an understanding of the pilgrim's perspective on this place. For example, if a pilgrim came expecting to be cured of an ailment then he or she believed that this was a place in which that healing could occur.

-“No. When I first came, I was really just coming to Conyers to see what was going on. I did not know anything more about *The Farm* than it was a Marian apparition site. I suppose I was hoping that I could see an apparition myself but I think that was just a fleeting thought.”

-“When I come to Conyers now, I think I do have some expectations. I usually expect that this place will provide me with a sense of spiritual development and renewed fervor for my faith.”

-“Yes, I'm praying that a miracle will happen for my son who has cancer.”

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-“Every time I have come, my expectations of this place have been met. Each time I leave, I leave a different person from when I came. It is a wonderful feeling.”

-“Yes and no. I didn't get to see Her but I know She was here.”

-“Yes, I could feel Her all around me.”

### **Do you have any feelings about this place and the events that occur here?**

The final question in this section deals with the pilgrims' feelings about *The Farm* in general and the events that go on there. It was designed to be an open ended question in which I was trying to let the pilgrims express their personal thoughts, beliefs, and feelings that had not been able to be expressed yet.

-“I love coming to this place. I truly believe in the events that happen here. The first time I came happened to be the last time the Blessed Mother and Jesus appeared to Nancy on the thirteenth of the month. At that time, I witnessed a crowd of tens of thousands of people. I truly saw the multitude of people the apparition attracted. But see, when there is an outward sign of a miracle occurring, I think it is easy for people to believe. But at times like these, when there's no public display of the greatness of God, believing is more difficult. It's neat because now the pilgrims who are here come not because the Blessed Virgin and Jesus have said that they are going to be here but because the pilgrims know They are not going to be here. The pilgrims that come now, come in faith and pray together when an outward miracle is not promised.”

-“I'm kind of skeptical of this stuff but my sister told me I had to come down and at least see the place for myself.”

### **7.4 The Fourth Set of Questions**

The next set of questions addressed the significance of the natural and built environments to the pilgrims. The rationale for each question in this section is as follows.

In asking questions about the apparition room, shrines, statues, and other places of worship I was trying to determine what level of significance the built environment has on a pilgrim's overall experience. The same is true concerning questions about *The Farm's* physical landscape. The pilgrim's responses to these questions were essential to my study. As was discussed earlier, a therapeutic landscape exists when the physical (natural) and built environments combine to create an atmosphere that is conducive to healing. If the pilgrims expressed that the experience they had was strictly through the presence of the

Virgin Mary then it would not matter where the apparition was occurring therefore making it more difficult to suggest Conyers as a therapeutic landscape. But if the pilgrim expressed that their experience was caused by or enhanced by the serene, rural, and natural atmosphere present at *The Farm* then it could be concluded that the landscape of Conyers has therapeutic value.

**Have you ever been inside the apparition room?**

- “I have been in the apparition room every time I have come down here.”
- “No, the last time I was here it was too crowded to get in.”
- “Yes, I’ve been in every time I’ve been here. That makes it about 22 times.”

**What do you think about the apparition room?**

- “I love the apparition room. I love the way the silence of the room envelops you even if there are twenty other people in the room with you. It is a special place of course because that is where Jesus and Mary appear to Nancy. I feel like the room protects Jesus and the Blessed Mother while they are here as well as the faith and love They leave us behind. It is like the walls of this simple room keep Their faith and love circulating for all to feel and witness long after the apparition has occurred.”
- “It’s a peaceful place but it’s always so busy in there.”
- “I like it but it’s not my favorite place here.”

**How do you feel when you are in the apparition room?**

- “I feel special. I feel privileged that I can be lucky enough to be in the room where our Blessed Mother and her son have been.”
- “Sometimes I feel rushed because so many others want to come in.”
- “I always feel relaxed and peaceful when I’m in here.”

**When you come here, what do you do? Where do you go?**

- “I like to go to Mass at St. Pius Church and I spend time out at the Monastery of the Holy Spirit.”
- “I like to come to the apparition room and spend the rest of my time at the foot of the crucifix on Holy Hill.”
- “When there aren’t many kids around, I like to go sit and pray where the waterfall used to be.”

**Have you been or will you go to Holy Hill? Why do you or will you go there?**

-“Yes, I have been to Holy Hill many times. It is a beautiful place. I love the way the area has been set up with the crucifix atop the hill set in front of the pine trees. It is really quiet there. It is holy ground. I think what I like about it is while you are there you are right in the backyard of Nancy’s home and the homes of her neighbors but you would never know it by how private it is.”

-“No, I’ve not been yet but the helpers have told me I can’t leave without going there.”

-“I like to go there because it is holy ground and the crucifix is so life-like.”

**Have you taken water from the Holy Well? What will you do with the water?**

-“Yes I have taken water from the well. I just blessed myself and took a sip of it from the fountain. To be honest, I didn’t take any water home with me that time because I did not know what I would do with it. I honestly only blessed myself because that seemed to be the thing to do. Since then, I have taken water home once. I don’t know what I will do with it.”

-“I take the water home to bless my family before dinner and to bless our home.”

-“I use it to rub on the appropriate part of the body when someone in my family is sick or hurt.”

**Does the physical landscape of The Farm have any influence on your experience?**

-“Yes, very much so. I love how I can be in the hustle and bustle of downtown Conyers one minute and four minutes later be in the quiet serenity of The Farm. The landscape here is beautiful. It is a nice mix of rolling fields and wooded areas.”

-“Yes, I love being outdoors. The scenery here is beautiful.”

-“It’s nice here but I come just to see the Blessed Mother.”

**Does any particular aspect of The Farm’s physical landscape intrigue you?**

-“I love the wooded areas. I especially love the little field I just found that lets me look out into the distance. I like being able to enjoy the quiet of the trees. As wonderful as the apparition room and the crosses and statues are, the woods let me leave that man-made environment and escape into a natural environment.”

-“It is like the woods protect this place and separate you from the human world just down the road.”

**If the apparitions were occurring in a five story apartment building in downtown Atlanta, do you think you would have the same experience that you do here?**

-“I don’t think so. I like coming to The Farm because of its rural setting that allows me to walk freely in a natural environment that God created. The apparitions appearing in a rural area like this is a special blessing because we can see God’s presence wherever we are on The Farm. In the city, of course we can see God’s presence but I just don’t think it would be the same.”

-“Yes, I would go wherever the Blessed Mother was.”

## **7.5 Concluding Questions**

The final set of questions addressed the pilgrim’s prior pilgrimage experience.

This let me know if the pilgrim went on pilgrimages often or if this was a new event for him or her. These questions also let me know if the pilgrim experienced any form of emotional, physical, or spiritual healing while at *The Farm*. An affirmative answer to any of these forms of healing would lend empirical support to the idea that Conyers is a therapeutic landscape.

**Have you ever visited any other Marian pilgrimage site?**

-“No I have not, but I have always been extremely interested in Medjugore, Fatima, and Lourdes.”

-“Yes, I have been to Medjugore twice.”

-“Yes, I have been to the one in Denver.”

**Would you be willing to discuss your current health?**

-“Yes. I’m perfectly healthy.”

-“No.”

-“Yes. I am suffering from cancer.”

**Have you ever experienced any form of emotional, physical, or spiritual healing while here or after you have visited here?**

-“I have definitely experienced spiritual healing every time I have been here.”

-“Yes. My doctor told me I had a tumor in my breast so I came here to pray. When I went for my appointment the next week, it was gone.”

-“I brought my brother who hadn’t been going to Church at all, and now he goes every week and comes down here every month.”

**What was the healing like and has your life changed because of it?**

-“I think I’m a pretty strong in my faith but every time I leave here, it’s like this spiritual fire has been rekindled in me. It changes my life because although before coming I may not have realized that I had faltered in my faith a bit, I realize after coming that I had. I therefore strive to keep this renewed spirituality present in my daily life.”

-“It’s changed my brother because now he accepts God in his life.”

**What do you attribute this healing to?**

-“I really do attribute the healing to my faith and belief in the Lord and His works of mercy.”

-“I think it’s this place and how spiritual it is here.”

Forty of the forty-six pilgrims I interviewed divulged that their lives felt somehow improved in varying degrees (be it emotionally, spiritually, or physically) by their visit to *The Farm*. The pilgrims who completely believed in the reality of miracles attributed these improvements to God’s “incredible mercy and love.” Those pilgrims who were more unsure of the supernatural events occurring at Conyers said that although they did not rule out miracles, it was more likely that each person finally had the opportunity and time to reflect and try to keep life in perspective. The most skeptical pilgrims simply confessed that they did not know what caused their life to improve and did not understand the change but were thankful and felt better. From the affirmative responses given by the pilgrims to the questions concerning the occurrence of healing in their lives and listening to them speak of the importance of the beautiful setting *The Farm* offers them, I have concluded that the landscape of *The Farm* in Conyers, Georgia, is indeed therapeutic for many pilgrims who travel there.



## CHAPTER VIII: FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO CONYERS' THERAPEUTIC LANDSCAPE

The goal of this thesis is to determine what factors contribute to Conyers' therapeutic landscape. In this chapter, insight gained from pilgrim responses, personal ideas and experiences, and the ideas of past research will relate the overall research findings within the new cultural geography perspective. This chapter is divided into six sections and addresses the location, setting, and natural beauty of the apparition site; the religious diversity in the area; the lack of commercialism near the apparition site; the significance of the apparition room; the presence of ritual and *communitas*; and the idea of *flow*.

### The Contributing Factors:

#### 8.1 Location, Setting, and Natural Beauty

I think these first few factors are quite interesting because while they address the conditions at this particular apparition site, they can be generalized and are applicable to aspects of many different therapeutic landscapes. By this I mean these factors are oftentimes sought out in many different settings, not necessarily Marian apparition sites, and can take on a soothing quality for those in search of some form of healing or renewal. From this research, I conclude that *The Farm's* geographic location, physical setting, and natural beauty do contribute to Conyers' therapeutic landscape. As mentioned earlier, *The Farm* is located approximately twenty-four miles east of Atlanta, Georgia. Atlanta is the

largest city in Georgia and is growing at a rapid pace. In fact, it was the home of the 1996 Centennial Olympic Games and therefore served as an international hub this summer. The reason this is stated is to support the idea that many pilgrimage sites are located at the periphery of major cities (Nolan and Nolan 1989). A pilgrimage site located on the periphery of a major city allows the pilgrims ease of access and convenience to experience the sacred or supernatural characteristics of the site. This is especially true of *The Farm*. Since Conyers is only a few miles out of metro Atlanta, there are plenty of means of transportation and access routes for travelers or pilgrims. The international airport, bus stations, and developed highway system bring the majority of the pilgrims from the city to *The Farm*.

Another attraction of this apparition site is its location in the continental United States. While Western Europe and Mexico have been home to many pilgrimage sites, most notably Medjugore, Bosnia-Herzegovina; Fatima, Portugal; Lourdes, France; and Guadalupe, Mexico, the United States in comparison has had very few apparition sites. Since 1988, visionaries in six other U.S. cities claim to have seen apparitions of Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary. These cities are Scottsdale, Arizona; Denver, Colorado; Cold Spring, Kentucky; Marlboro Township, New Jersey; Emmitsburg, Maryland; and Miami, Florida (White 8 Oct 1994). These sites have not all had the turn-out that Conyers has had but pilgrims have gone to these sites as well in recent years.

An American pilgrimage site like Conyers offers an opportunity for people to visit a holy site without the expense of traveling to another country. According to the 1996 Catholic Spiritual Pilgrimages guide presented by the Queen of Peace Ministry, a trip to the three major pilgrimage sites in Europe can currently cost between one and two

thousand dollars. It is very difficult for many pilgrims to fund such a trip and therefore Conyers is viewed as a cheaper alternative to Medjugore, Fatima, and Lourdes. An elderly woman I spoke with explained "I've always wanted to go to Medjugore to see our Blessed Mother and feel Her graces but I've never been able to afford the travel expenses. When I heard that She was appearing here in Georgia, I wept with joy, and me and my husband started driving from Michigan the very next day." In short, the apparitions occurring in Conyers allow many U.S. residents the opportunity to think, act, and feel like religious pilgrims perhaps for the first time.

As mentioned before, *The Farm* is located in rural Georgia despite its close proximity to Atlanta. Such a location provides a serene and peaceful setting for those traveling to the apparition site. Although the main street in Conyers, lined with fast food restaurants and hotels, is only three miles down the road from the entrance to *The Farm*, a pilgrim would never realize it while visiting *The Farm*. In the middle of an interview with a thirty year old woman, she paused and said "It absolutely amazes me that one minute I'm driving down a busy highway fighting traffic and trying to determine where my family should eat and sleep and then five minutes later I'm driving down a road leading me to heaven. It's like a Twilight Zone. While I'm here, I'm in another world unlike any I've been in before. It's so quiet. It's so peaceful. It's so holy. Yet go beyond those trees and in *five* minutes time we're thrust back into the reality of the world." A twenty-five year old male pilgrim expressed similar feelings. "I live in Conyers and work in Atlanta. Throughout the week my life is hectic and non-stop. On the weekends, I spend much of my time here at *The Farm* and no kidding, I feel like I'm a thousand miles from home. What's weird is after spending an afternoon here in this holy place being so separated from

an earthly world, I drive home and along the way I stop and pick up some McDonald's for dinner."

The natural beauty of *The Farm* seems to add to the pilgrim's experience while here. The isolation and the fact that it is at the periphery of human activity is an attraction to pilgrims retreating from the "real" world, but the rolling fields, stands of trees, and solitude of nature contribute immensely to the pilgrim experience. Pilgrims often mentioned that they felt enveloped by the natural surroundings and it provided them with a sense of peace, security, and comfort while they were there. One question asked of pilgrims during interviews was if the apparitions were occurring in a high-rise apartment in downtown Atlanta, do you think you would have the same pilgrim experience as you do here at *The Farm*? Only three of the forty-six interviewed said they would. The others explained that they wouldn't because of the setting of *The Farm*. Among the reasons was that being out in nature "in God's workplace" brings home the reality that God is present. Many added, "not that God isn't present in a city" but in the outdoors God's presence seems to be more obvious. A fifty-two year old pilgrim explained that "I like being out in the country because I can sit here and pray the Rosary with all of these faithful people and when I get tired of seeing all of them and want more quiet time for me, I can just retreat into the woods a bit, pray on my own, and not know that anyone else is within miles of me. I couldn't do that in an apartment building. Being out in nature gives me a sense of freedom."

## 8.2 Religious Diversity

An interesting point of Conyer's landscape is that it is located in the "Deep South" which is predominantly Southern Baptist. An analysis of churches (Figure 2) in the Conyers area reveals that Baptist congregations compose 44.6 percent (33 churches) of all churches whereas Roman Catholic parishes compose only 4.1 percent (3 churches). This is a point that has not gone unnoticed by the pilgrims. A forty year old female pilgrim stated "I would expect the Blessed Mother to appear in the areas She did in Europe because the people there are predominantly Catholic. I think it's really unique that She chooses to bless us with Her presence here in Conyers considering the majority of people here are Baptist. I've always felt it's easier to believe when you're among like minded individuals with similar beliefs. But it is different when you have to stand up for your faith and what you believe in when there are so many others doubting you." Some of the pilgrims living in Conyers felt some initial discrimination as they have stood up for their faith and the events occurring there. The pilgrims expressed that major discriminatory acts were not practiced against believing Catholics but their children were faced with teasing and bullying at school for their faith and adults felt they were often the focus of negative jokes and jeering.

I think it is also important to explain how the religious composition of the neighborhoods surrounding the apparition site has changed slightly over the last few years. My initial intention was to walk through one particular neighborhood near the apparition site to speak with the residents who did not participate in the activities to get their opinion and perspective on the apparition events. To my surprise when I asked a neighbor for her assistance, she quickly explained that that would be fine except that since the apparitions

have begun, nine non-believing families had relocated out of the neighborhood and nine families from around the country replaced them when they moved from their towns to Conyers to be closer to the apparition site. To my surprise, this particular neighbor knew of many families that had relocated to the area for the same reasons.

### **8.3 Lack of Commercialism**

An aspect of Conyers' symbolic landscape that adds to the attractiveness of *The Farm* is the lack of Marian commercialism present in the area. Nolan and Nolan suggest that in Western Europe the sacred and the profane are often times mixed at religious pilgrimage sites (1989). In an examination of Lourdes, Gesler writes that "visitors to Lourdes are usually struck by the stark contrast between piety and commercialism, between the serenity and silence of religious worship and the clamor of everyday life. This contrast has a clear geographic aspect to it as two distinct areas of the town can be distinguished. First there is the 'summer town' of shops, hotels and restaurants; bustling and noisy, it is profane space. Sacred space is marked off in the Domain of Our Lady, crowded at times during the day, but an area where either quiet reverence or organized processions are the rule" (1996, p. 102). He further explains that commercialism is rampant and souvenir shops line the streets with cheap goods to sell to pilgrims or tourists.

In Conyers a similar geography can be seen. There is an area where hotels, restaurants, and shopping malls line the streets but the difference is that these businesses primarily existed before the apparitions began and were built in conjunction with the growing population. In Lourdes and Medjugore, however, tourism and commercialism

developed after the apparitions began to accommodate the influx of pilgrims and tourists to the area. Another point is that the downtown area of Conyers is not unlike business areas of other cities where pilgrims come from. Therefore the pilgrims at Conyers did not view the business area as a distraction but rather as a convenience for eating, sleeping, and entertaining after the events at *The Farm* were complete for the day. The pilgrims did however, comment on the nicety of not having commercialism directly related to the apparitions. They mentioned that there are only three Catholic "souvenir" shops along the street leading to the apparition site in comparison to other pilgrimage sites where hundreds of shops line the streets. A thirty-four year old male pilgrim added "I like the idea that the only souvenir I bring home with me is my renewed faith rather than a cheap statue of Mary or a plastic set of rosary beads."

#### **8.4 Apparition Room**

Another contributing aspect is the apparition room. Gesler points out that Spencer and Blades "stress the supporting, controlling, and competitive roles played by physical settings such as buildings and rooms within buildings on human behavior" (Gesler 1992, p. 737). At *The Farm*, the apparition room takes on a very supportive role for the pilgrims in their journey of faith. As mentioned before the apparition room is the place where the Virgin Mother and Jesus appear to Nancy Fowler. When asked what was their favorite place at *The Farm*, thirty-two of the interviewees responded that their favorite place was the apparition room. When asked why, most responded that that is where they feel closest to Mary because "it is like her spirit is contained within the room even after she is no longer present." The apparition room serves as a tangible, contained spot where the

Virgin Mary was present rather than an open or outdoor location such as a tree, bush, or somewhere on a hillside. The pilgrims believe the walls of the room act to keep Her presence alive after She has departed. When observing the pilgrims as they are standing outside of the room to when they enter the room, a very drastic change in their behavior can be seen. While outside the room you can liken their behavior to a crowd of people content with conversing and socializing. But when the pilgrims enter the apparition room their behavior completely changes, as if on cue, into a complete state of reverence. I think this is important because the pilgrims attach meaning and significance to this room and revere it as a special place in which a certain behavior is expected and even accepted.

### **8.5 Ritual and *Communitas***

Ritual, in general, can have a dramatic unifying effect. The Catholic rituals practiced at *The Farm* have a considerable impact on the pilgrimage experience and contribute to the therapeutic value of Conyers' landscape. Although pilgrims bring individual rituals with them that they may practice on their own or in their parishes, there is one ritual that seems to unite almost all of the pilgrims who visit the apparition site. This is the Rosary. No matter where pilgrims are located on *The Farm's* property, at precisely noontime, everyone gathers around the farmhouse to repeat the decades of the Rosary and finger their beads. The Rosary is a prayer that remains the same in Catholicism throughout the world and, at Conyers, it serves as a unifying prayer for the pilgrims. Many pilgrims expressed how they liked to come to *The Farm* because of this unifying feeling or the comradeship they felt when they came in communion with so many others. The pilgrims also explained that they liked having so many others come in faith



because their faith was something the pilgrims wanted to be able to share with others. Anthropologists Turner and Turner refer to this as *communitas* (Turner and Turner 1978). *Communitas* is “a relational quality of full unmediated communication, even communion, between definite and determinate identities, which arises spontaneously in all kinds of groups, situations, and circumstances” (Turner and Turner 1978, p. 250). *Communitas* serves as a unifying feeling that evokes meaning for a pilgrim. The Turners further suggest that “pilgrimage always tends towards *communitas*, a state of unmediated and egalitarian association between individuals who are temporarily freed of the hierarchical secular roles and statuses which they bear in everyday life. The achievement of *communitas* is the pilgrim’s fundamental motivation” (Eade and Sallnow 1991, p. 4). I do not believe this degree of *communitas* is present at Conyers. Instead of thinking of *communitas* as the priority or goal of the pilgrim, I think it is simply an added benefit of making the pilgrimage to the holy site. The basis for this rationale is that most of the pilgrims that I spoke with were all genuinely surprised at the comraderie they felt towards their fellow pilgrims. *Communitas* was not something that they were hoping would happen or expecting to happen. The achievement of *communitas* was not, therefore, the fundamental motivation for the pilgrims. Instead, it was simply seen as another blessed opportunity to share ones feelings, beliefs, and faith.

## **8.6 Personal Experience and Flow**

One reason for sharing my personal experience as a pilgrim with the reader is to serve as an example of a concept termed by Csikszentmihalyi as *flow*. “Flow is the holistic sensation present when we act with total involvement, a state in which action follows

action according to an internal logic, with no apparent need for conscious intervention on our part" (Turner and Turner 1978, p. 254). Behavior then becomes an unconscious series of events seemingly without exterior influence or motivation. During my trips to *The Farm*, I realize that I have experienced *flow* at various times in forms of prayer, song, and silence. It is a very peaceful and calming experience that relaxes the mind and body and allows it to enter a state in which you do not think about what is supposed to happen next. The events just naturally occur without conscious effort. You do not actually realize, however, that you're in *flow* until you have awoken from that mental state. This concept can actually be compared to the "peak performance" an athlete often experiences while playing sports. While conducting the interviews at the apparition site, many pilgrims agreed and said that they too have experienced *flow* at Conyers. They explained that the holiness, serenity, solitude, and natural beauty of *The Farm* often enveloped them to the point where they were walking, singing, or praying when they were not even aware that they are doing so. When the pilgrims explained their individual stories it was evident they did not realize that they were in *flow* when they were. It was only after they felt an "awakening" that they realized they were in some form of an inner state. Although according to Csikszentmihalyi *flow* can also be experienced in play and sport, the pilgrims feel that their form of *flow* is very spiritually oriented and is brought out by the solitude of *The Farm*.

## CHAPTER IX: CONCLUSION

### 9.1 Summary of Findings

The overall focus of this study was to determine if a therapeutic landscape exists at *The Farm* in Conyers, Georgia. The goals of this study were to determine why the pilgrims attach significance and meaning to that place and what factors contribute to the therapeutic value of that landscape. Through my own pilgrim experience and in speaking with pilgrims traveling to Conyers, Georgia, I found that *The Farm* certainly offers a therapeutic landscape to many people who travel there. I have determined that this area represents a therapeutic landscape for the following reasons. First, *The Farm* is genuinely a site where pilgrims feel they can and do experience some degree of physical, emotional, mental, and/or spiritual healing either while they are on their pilgrimage or soon after they return from the pilgrimage. The pilgrims attribute this healing to the presence of and graces offered by Mary in addition to the serene and natural atmosphere of *The Farm*. Secondly, the pilgrims validate the concept of a therapeutic landscape as a place where the natural and built environments combine to create a sense of healing for them. The pilgrims repeatedly made the connection between the appealing characteristics of a rural countryside farmland and the built environment in the form of buildings, statues, and other shrines. Of all the areas on *The Farm*, the sampled pilgrims' favorite places were the Apparition Room, the crucifix on Holy Hill, and the Fatima statue. All of these sites would be considered built environment. In addition, the pilgrims also stressed how the

rural atmosphere present in the natural beauty of *The Farm* added so much to their pilgrim experience in terms of offering quiet time and solitude, the opportunity to commune with nature, and the ability to retreat from their hectic lives to the serenity of the rural environment.

I have also determined that the pilgrims attach meaning to *The Farm* for two reasons. First, most pilgrims attach sacred and/or religious meaning to *The Farm* because they believe Jesus and the Virgin Mary are present. By coming to *The Farm*, performing devotional acts, and abiding by Mary's messages, the pilgrims believe three things will happen: their sins will be forgiven, Mary will find favor in them for being so faithful, and She will bring them ever closer to God. The second reason is that the area truly does represent a symbolic landscape for the pilgrims. The symbolic landscape is an expression of culture, values, behavior, and actions and represents those who are present in that landscape. At *The Farm*, the pilgrims can see themselves or the people they would like to be in that symbolic landscape. The pilgrims see the sacredness of Jesus and Mary; they see the goodness and spirituality of other pilgrims; they see the presence of Catholic ritual; and they see the opportunity for personal growth. From these images, their individual sense of place arises and they subsequently attach meaning, emotion, and feeling to the landscape.

As discussed in Chapter 8, there were many factors that contribute to the therapeutic value of Conyers' landscape. As a review, I found that the location, setting, and natural beauty of *The Farm*, the religious diversity present in the area, the lack of commercialism near the apparition site, the Apparition Room, and ritual, *communitas*, and *flow* all contribute to create Conyers' therapeutic landscape.

## 9.2 The Study's Place and Contributions

This study on the therapeutic value of Conyers' landscape fits into and contributes to the "new" humanist cultural geography. It is appropriate for the knowledge gained in this study to belong in this subdiscipline because this research attempts to understand how landscapes are perceived and interpreted symbolically by humans. This study further shows how individuals react to their environments in terms of emotions, beliefs, and values.

This study's contributions are three-fold. First, the findings contribute to cultural and medical geography's overall understanding of healing places and therapeutic landscapes. Within this idea my research offers empirical evidence in support of the cultural/medical geographic concepts of therapeutic landscape, symbolic landscape, and sense of place in the context of the Conyers pilgrim experience.

Secondly, this thesis contributes to the ongoing discussion of *communitas* within the anthropological world. Although I agree with Turner and Turner that *communitas* is present among pilgrims at a pilgrimage site, I disagree with them in that I do not believe *communitas* is the primary motivation for pilgrims making their pilgrimage. Instead, I think *communitas* is an added and usually unexpected benefit of the pilgrimage experience.

And finally, this study could benefit the medical world in terms of providing support for alternate means of therapy for patients. We have been shown time and again that modern medicine does not cure all ailments. Many times a retreat from the world provides the opportunity for reflection, growth, and healing that allows people to be cured of the problems, illnesses, and stresses they perceive themselves to be having. I and a few others researchers have now shown that therapeutic landscapes do exist and that these

landscapes provide necessary healing and therapy for many who travel to them. I think insurance companies, referral systems, and especially doctors should more actively pursue the potential for funding or covering pilgrimage trips to various types of therapeutic landscapes as an alternate means for patients seeking among other things, healing or a sense of peace. I think such an opportunity would not only reduce the already large physician demand but may even reduce the expense of doctor's bills for the patient.

### **9.3 Future Research**

This thesis analyzed the Marian apparition site located in Conyers, Georgia. It was presented in the context of its similarities to other Marian pilgrimage sites as well as focusing on the factors, unique to Conyers, that have helped to create a healing environment to which pilgrims now flock. After speaking with the pilgrims, I believe there is little doubt they believe that in various ways healings do occur at this apparition site. This piece of work is, however, only the foundation upon which others can build. This apparition site is still very young and has a long road to maturity. If it continues to exist and thrive, it will undoubtedly change in many ways. Perhaps more structures will be built, or the Church will officially support it, or more land will be purchased, or maybe even healings will be verified and more people will come. There is still a lot that can be learned at *The Farm* and from the pilgrims concerning the therapeutic value of this pilgrimage site.

In the greater scheme of Marian pilgrimage sites, I think it would be interesting to continue work in this field by addressing the geography of the recent Marian pilgrimage sites in the U.S, the possible link this may have to the resurgence of the Cult of Mary in

the U.S., as well as a comparison and contrasting look at the geography and environment of each site and if, because of their natural and built landscapes, any of those sites are conducive to being called therapeutic landscapes.

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